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THE GLORY, DECLINE, AND LEGACY OF ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

GENGHIS KHAN:
THE STORM FROM THE EAST
The Mongol Empire
That Changed the World

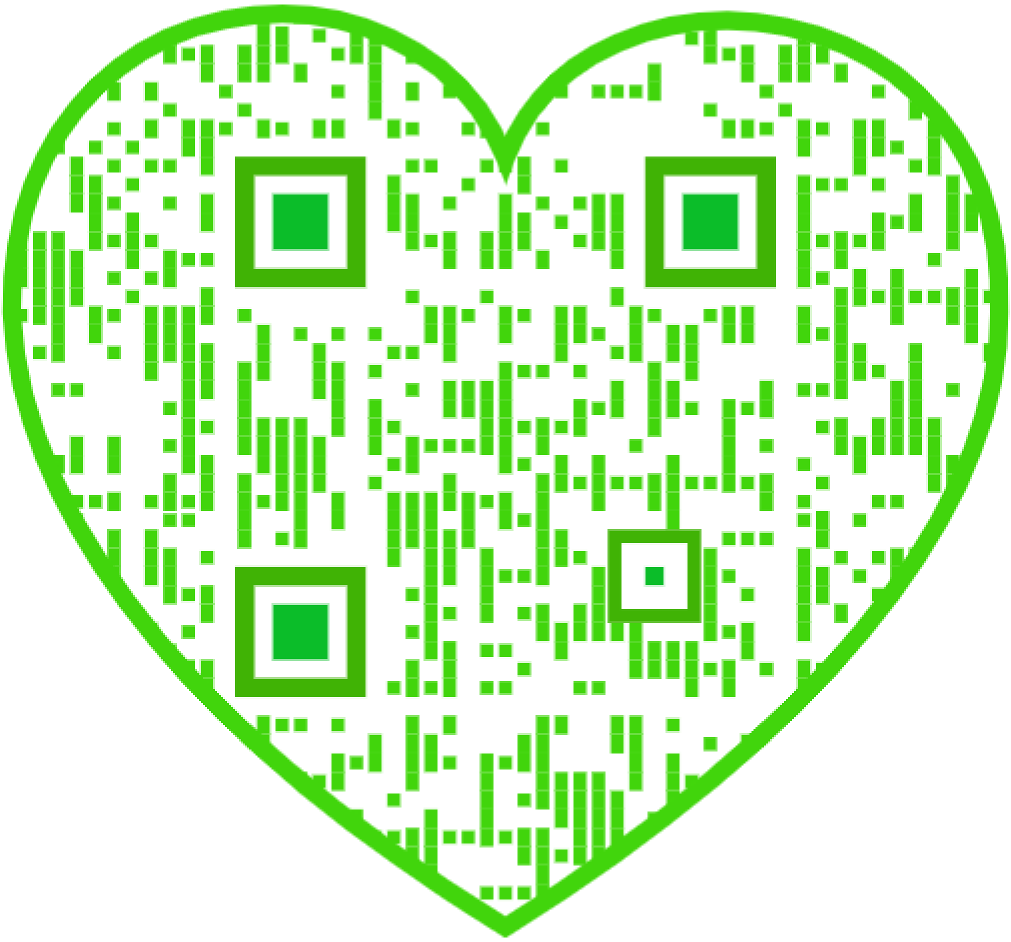
FROM OLYMPUS
TO OBLIVION:
THE UNTOLD STORY OF
ANCIENT GREECE

WHEN TITANS FELL

THE RISE AND FALL OF CIVILIZATIONS

FATE, WARS, CLIMATE, AND THE END OF ANCIENT EMPIRES

plus
Eyes of the Nile
Espionage, Intrigue, and Intelligence in the Pharaoh's Court



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14
Echoes of the Past: Shattered Thrones: Wars, Climate, and the End of Ancient Empires

40
The Rise and Fall of Mesopotamia: The Cradle That Broke

52
From Ziggurats to Empires: Decoding the Dawn of Civilization

CONTENTS

FEATURES

108
Rise and Fall of the Eternal Roman Empire

124
Japan’s Heian Period: A Golden Age Doomed in the End

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60 The Egyptian Empire: A Tale of Gods, Power, and Sand

70 Espionage in Ancient Egypt: From Old Kingdom Spies to Ptolemaic Informants

86 From Olympus to Oblivion: The Untold Story of Ancient Greece's Fall

136 Genghis Khan and the Storm from the East: The Mongol Empire That Changed the World

REGULARS

04 Editor's Note

06 ArchaeoNews

166 Artifact world: The Golden Seal of the King of Na The Mighty Chinese Dinasty

162 History Heroes: Freya Stark: Historian, Explorer, spy and Tireless Ambassador for the Middle East

168 Unlocking the Paste: A. Refik Kutluer: The Visionary Behind Turkey's Tourism Industry – An Exclusive Interview

184 Academy of Taste: Cooking recipes from the ancient world: Moretum the best sallad in Roman Empire

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MASSIMO BONASORTE
Chief Editor, Ancient Origins Magazine

The story of civilization is often told as a tale of triumph. We celebrate the rise of empires, the splendor of monuments, the genius of rulers, and the glow of golden ages. But etched in the ruins of history is another story—one of collapse, chaos, and abandonment. Egypt's pyramid builders, the rulers of Mesopotamia, the engineers of the Indus Valley, the seafaring Minoans, the dynastic empires of China: each rose with dazzling promise and fell under the weight of converging crises.

What binds these disparate collapses together is not merely the passage of time, but the haunting familiarity of their demise. Environmental instability, political infighting, external pressures, and social unraveling are not just the remnants of antiquity; they echo uncannily with the challenges we face today.

Archaeology and climate science have revealed just how interwoven human decisions and natural forces have always been. Ice cores from Greenland contain traces of ancient volcanic eruptions that blackened skies and cooled the planet, suppressing crops from Rome to the Nile. Tree rings from Anatolia and the Levant expose years of devastating droughts that likely pushed the Sea Peoples into Egypt and destabilized Bronze Age kingdoms. Fossilized pollen and sediment layers tell us when rivers dried, when cities emptied, and when once-thriving civilizations became ghostly ruins.

The 4.2 kiloyear event—a catastrophic drought around 2200 BCE—crippled Egypt's Old Kingdom, scattered Mesopotamian cities, and triggered migrations across Asia. In other periods, eruptions like Thera's obliterated trade routes and swallowed coastal settlements. The Minoans endured, for a time, but the economic aftershocks opened the door to Mycenaean takeover. In China, the fall of dynasties often coincided with erratic monsoons or river shifts, provoking peasant revolts and ushering in warlord eras.

These societies did not fall because they lacked greatness. They fell, in part, because their greatness was brittle. Their power was centralized but rigid. Their wealth was vast but unequally distributed. Their confidence in permanence blinded them to looming disruption.

And so, the uncomfortable question: how different are we today?

Modern society revels in its dominion over nature, in its sprawling cities and digital empires. Yet our systems—economic, political, ecological—are under siege from within and without. Climate change, resource depletion, political polarization, and systemic inequality mirror the converging stressors that eroded ancient orders. Our conquest is no longer of lands and rivers, but of data, markets, and influence. Yet the mindset remains eerily similar: dominate, extract, expand.

Where ancient kings raised armies, we launch code. Where they sought glory through monuments, we seek it through algorithms. But in both cases, ambition without adaptation leads to ruin.

The past warns us: success does not immunize a society against collapse. In fact, it may accelerate it when paired with hubris. The grandeur of the past was often built atop fragile foundations—a lesson we must heed as we navigate our own.

To learn from history is not to mourn its losses, but to study its turning points. Ancient societies that responded flexibly—shifting trade routes, reforming governance, forging new alliances—had a chance at continuity. Those that clung to tradition, hoarded power, or ignored environmental realities did not.

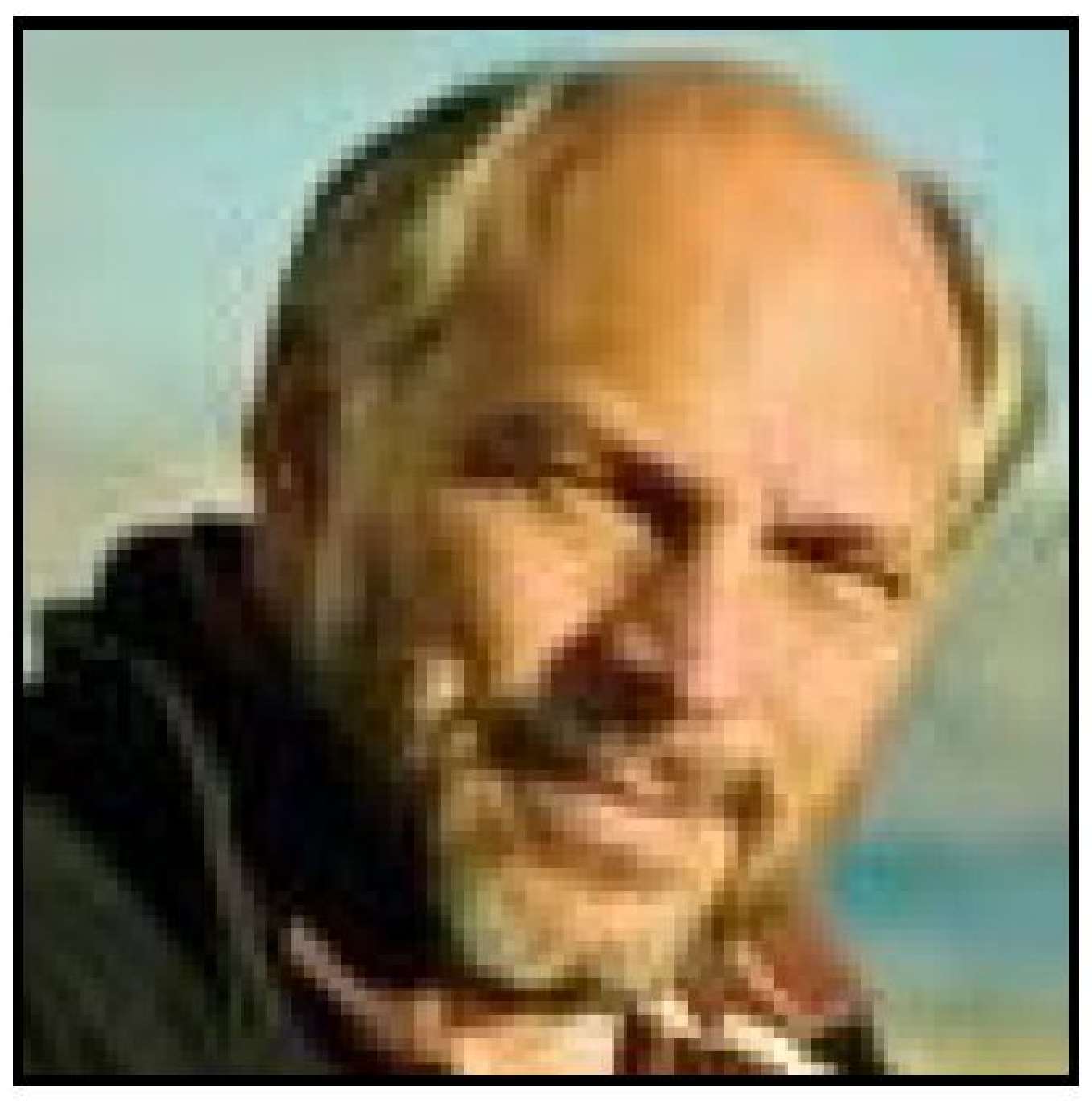
Today, we face our own crossroads. We can treat the archaeological record as a cautionary archive or as a distant curiosity. But if we listen closely, these ruins whisper truths about sustainability, resilience, and the cost of short-sighted conquest.

In an age of rapid change, perhaps the greatest power is not domination, but adaptation. And perhaps the highest monument we can leave behind is not one of stone, but of foresight.

History, after all, is not a static chronicle. It is a mirror. The question is: do we dare to look?

SPOTLIGHT: RISE AND FALL OF CIVILISATION

EXPERTS IN THIS ISSUE...



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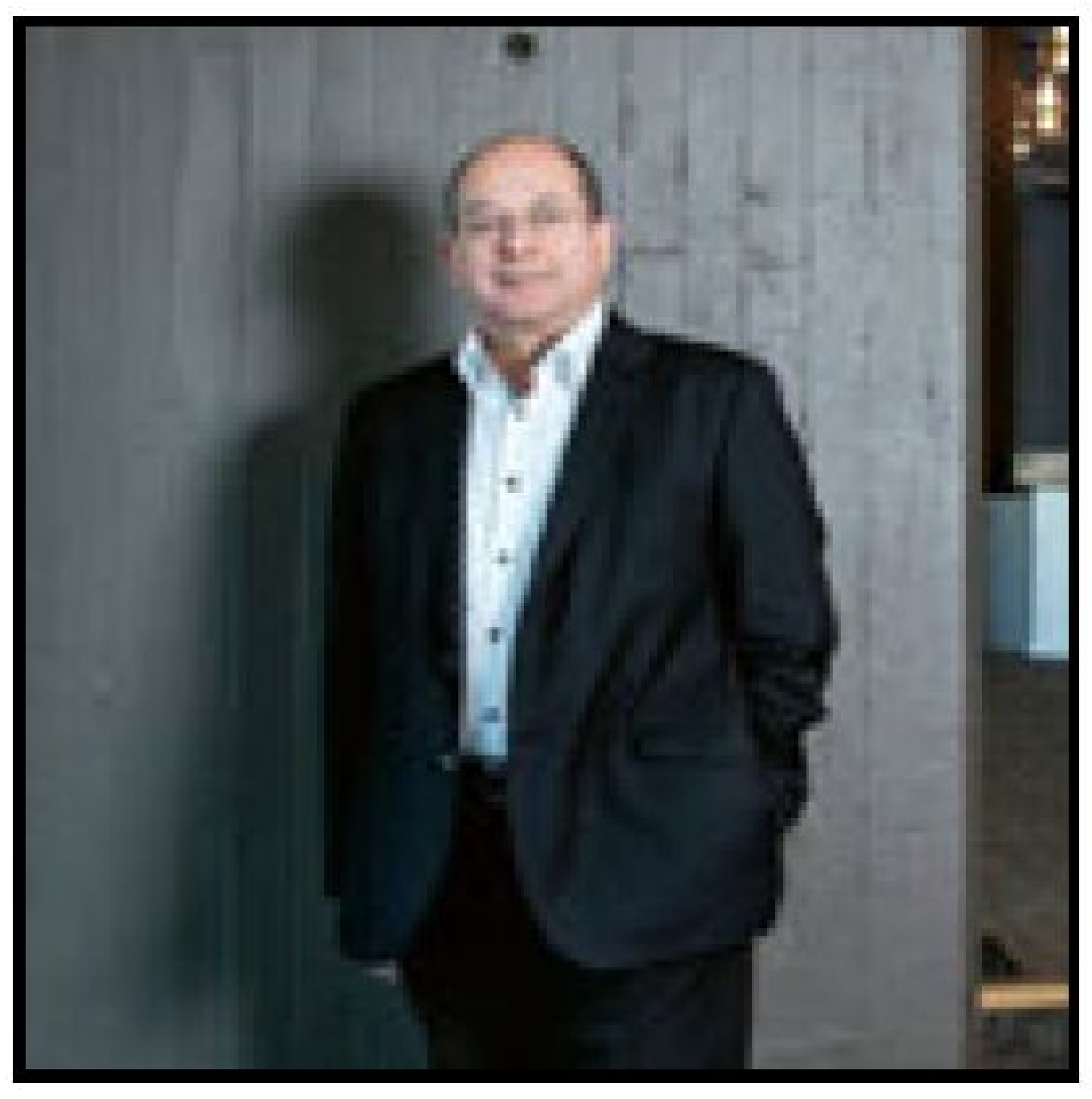

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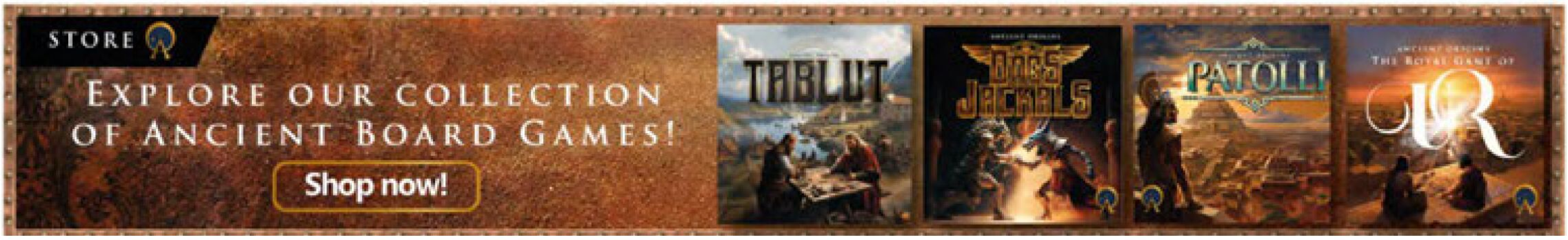
A. Refik Kutluer is currently the partner and General Manager of Alabanda Tourism Inc. in Ankara, and he was the first tourism executive in Turkey to hold the title of "CTIE – Certified Travel Industry Executive." Kutluer is also the founder of Ref Productions.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Archaeonews

By Nathan Falde

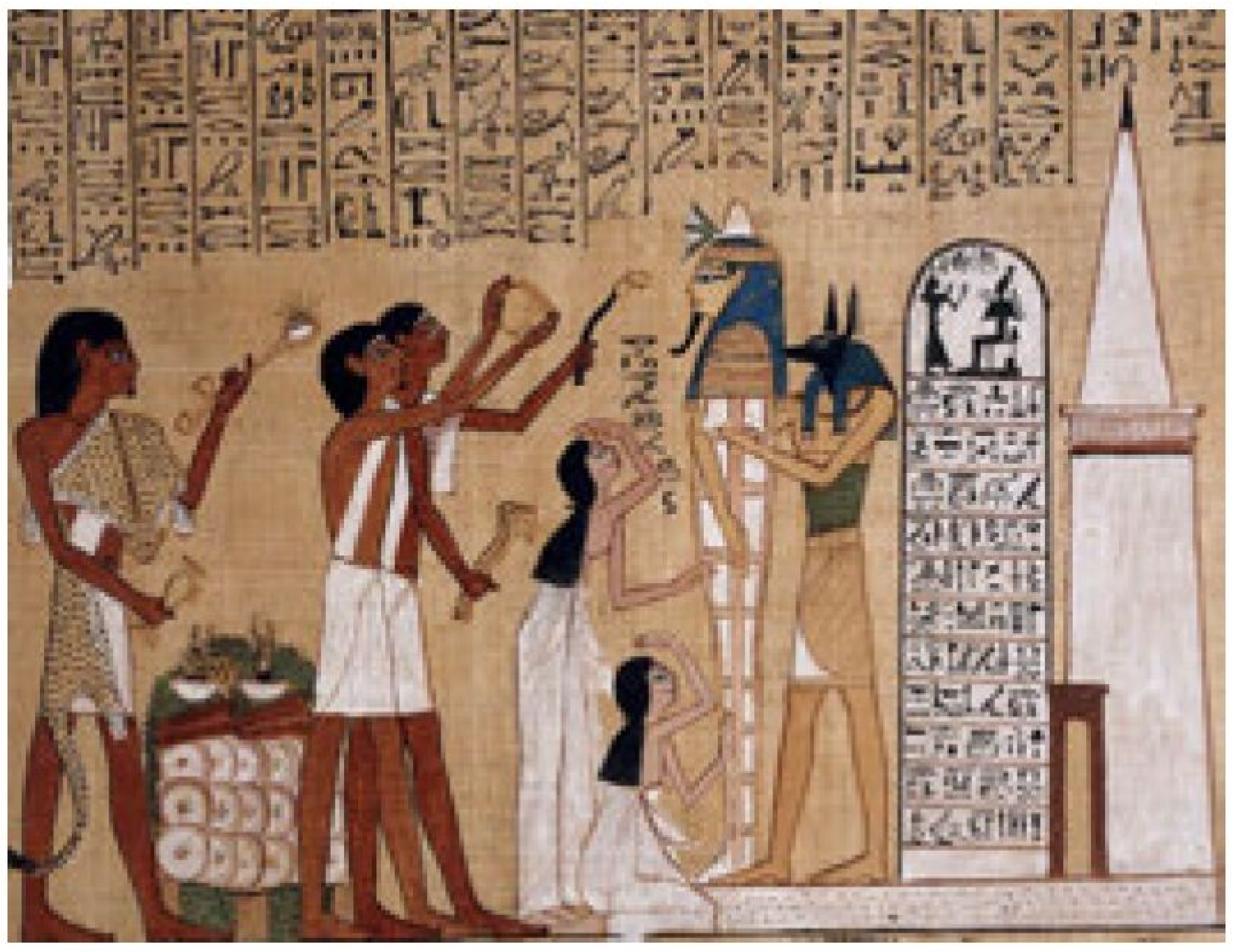
THE ORIGINAL SMELL OF EGYPTIAN MUMMIES IS REVEALED

The mummies of the ancient Egyptians are among the most studied artifacts in the world. Yet a new research project uncovered some brand new information about them, which is how they would have smelled in their original state, thousands of years ago inside the tombs that held them.

According to researchers from the University College London and the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, Ancient Egyptian mummified bodies smell 'woody,' 'spicy' and 'sweet', as a result of the complex mixture of natural chemical compounds used in the preservation process. The researchers examined nine ancient Egyptian mummies held in museums to identify these chemicals, with the oldest bodies coming from New Kingdom days (1539 to 1077 BC) and the newest from the Byzantine era (third to fourth century AD).

Gas chromatography and mass spectrometry were used to detect and quantify scent-related chemicals on the mummies, allowing the researchers to recreate the odors in a laboratory setting. An electronic 'nose' and a panel of experts classified the recreated odors based on intensity and pleasantness, to add a human element to this fascinating new form of sensory analysis.

Emma Paolin, PhD researcher at University of Ljubljana (rear) and Dr Cecilia Bembibre (UCL Bartlett School of Environment, Energy & Resources) (foreground) taking swab samples from mummy and coffin for microbiological analysis.



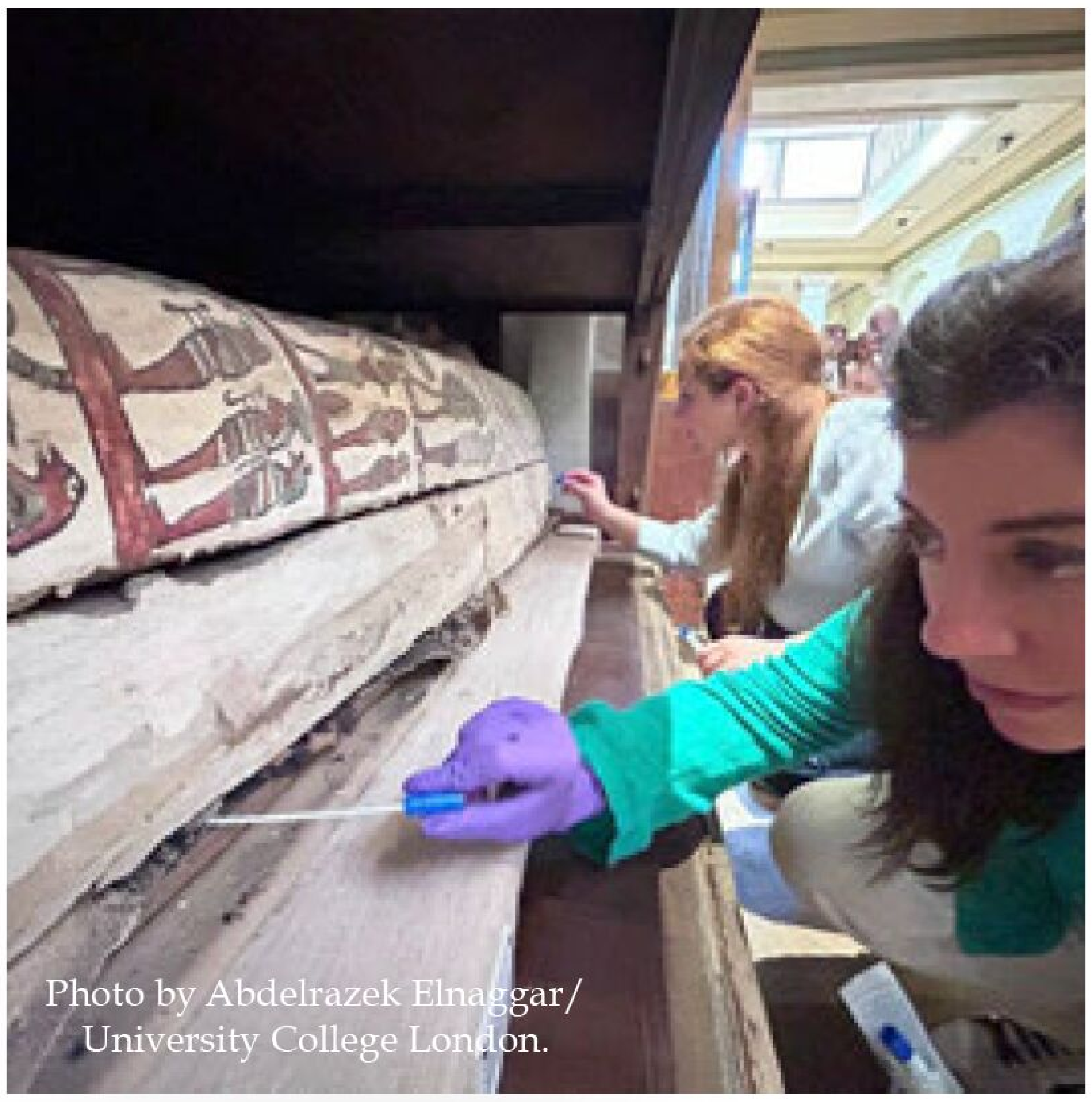


Photo by Abdelrazek Elnaggar/ University College London.

Photo by Abdelrazek Elnaggar/ University College London.

POOR VIKINGS SUFFERED FROM MANY DISEASES AND DISORDERS

Photo by Carolina Bertilsson

The Vikings have generally been seen as the embodiment of vigor and aggressive energy. But a new study of skeletal remains from a Viking Age settlement in Sweden contradicts this notion. It seems that Scandinavian peoples living at that time suffered from an astonishing array of health maladies, including severe oral and maxillofacial disease, sinus and ear infections, osteoarthritis, and much, much more.

This knowledge was obtained by researchers from University of Gothenburg, who examined the skulls of 15 adults excavated from a Viking Age Swedish cemetery using modern X-ray and CT scanning techniques. These tests revealed the grim truth about how hard life really was during Scandinavia's most legendary era. Despite their reputation as indefatigable conquerers, it seems the Viking people as a whole were a sickly bunch, suffering themselves even as they were spreading misery in the lands they conquered.

Interestingly, this is not the first research to reveal that the Vikings were an unhealthy bunch. A 2015 study of Viking remains found in Iceland found that few adults lived beyond the age of 30, while a 2020 study showed they were prodigious carriers of the smallpox virus.

OLDEST SECTION OF GREAT WALL OF CHINA UNEARTHED

In a discovery that shows how even the most well-known monuments may have secrets to reveal, archaeologists recently unearthed what has proven to be the oldest section of the Great Wall of China. This section was constructed in the eighth century BC, which is 300 years earlier than the next oldest part of the iconic wall.

In Shangdong province, archaeologists used cutting-edge techniques of analysis to piece together the construction timeline of the wall with greater precision. By integrating historical texts with physical evidence, the archaeologists determined that the section known as the Qi Great Wall was built in multiple stages.

The oldest walls likely date back to the early Spring and Autumn Period, with their foundations potentially dating back to the very late Western Zhou Dynasty, which preceded this period. Excavations revealed remnants of unique semi-underground dwellings beneath this section, suggesting that local inhabitants lived in the area before the wall was erected.

The Great Wall of China is one of the most extensive construction projects in history. Originally consisting of multiple parallel walls built as defensive fortifications, it intersects all of northern China and parts of southern Mongolia.

GATEWAY TO THE GODS: THE INCAN PORTAL OF AMARU MURU

Amaru Muru, also known as the Gate of the Gods, is a mysterious rock-cut structure near Lake Titicaca in Puno, Peru. Carved into a sandstone cliff, the flat-faced formation features a door-like niche, leading many to speculate about its ancient purpose. Local legend says it's a portal used by Incan priests to enter the spirit world. Though no definitive archaeological explanation exists, the site continues to inspire curiosity, spiritual pilgrimage, and myth.

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SAILING INTO THE AFTERLIFE: UNVEILING ÖLAND'S VIKING STONE SHIP

On the island of Öland, Sweden, lies a remarkable Viking-age stone ship burial—a grave outlined by large stones arranged in the shape of a ship. These stone ships symbolized the deceased's journey to the afterlife. Dating back over 1,000 years, the site reflects Norse beliefs in seafaring and death. Surrounded by the island's windswept landscape, the stone ship stands as a powerful testament to Viking ritual, myth, and their enduring maritime legacy.

RISE AND FALL OF CIVILIZAT

IONS

SHATTERED THRONES

Wars, Climate, and the End of Ancient Empires

Ancient civilizations rose to impressive heights and later crumbled due to a complex interplay of environmental pressures, warfare, and internal dynamics. Scholars increasingly recognize that factors like prolonged droughts, volcanic eruptions, and even meteorological anomalies often precipitated crises – for example, the global 4.2 kiloyear event around 2200 BC that was linked to upheavals from Egypt to China was one of the most severe climatic events of the Holocene epoch. At the same time, military conflicts – whether invasions by foreign armies or wars between rival states – frequently struck at moments of vulnerability, hastening collapse. Internal problems such as political corruption, succession crises, and economic decline further weakened these societies from within.

Recent archaeological and scientific advances allow for an interdisciplinary analysis of these factors: climate scientists and archaeologists together have pinpointed drought periods corresponding to collapse, identified volcanic ash in ice cores that correlate with failed harvests, and uncovered new texts and DNA evidence that illuminate ancient wars and migrations.

Below, we examine ten major civilizations in (roughly) chronological order – from the early river-valley cultures to medieval societies – analyzing how climate change, war, and internal strife contributed to their rise and fall, with insights from the latest discoveries.

EGYPT

The Gift and Curse of the Nile

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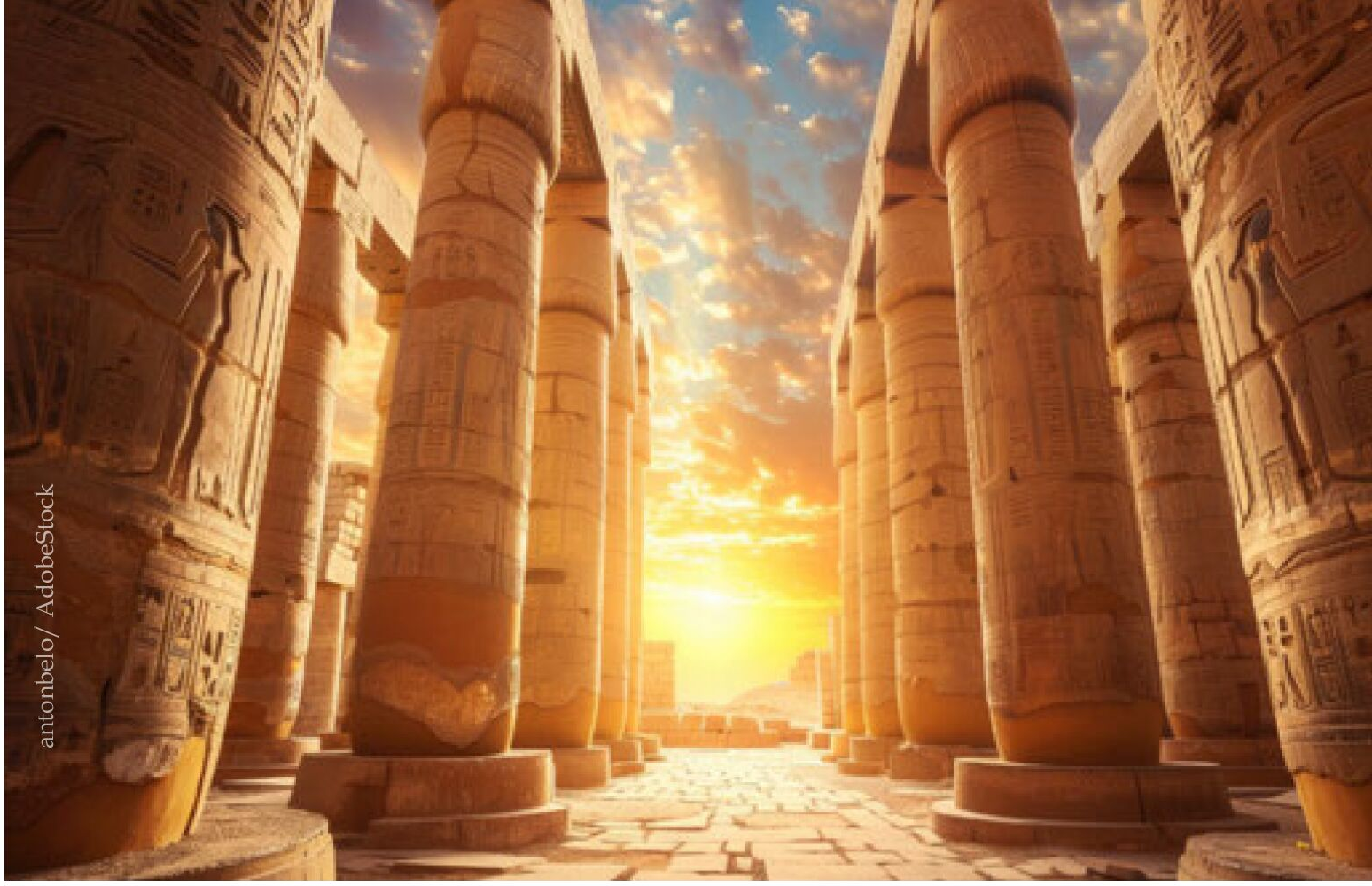

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Egyptian civilization flourished by harnessing the Nile's annual floods, yet it was highly vulnerable to climate shifts. The Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BC) era of pyramid building ended in crisis when the Nile's floods diminished during a severe drought around 2200 BC. This mega-drought, part of the 4.2 ka BP climate event, led to famine and decentralization; scholars hypothesize it triggered the collapse of Egypt's Old Kingdom and ushered in the First Intermediate Period.

Centuries later, the New Kingdom likewise faced environmental stress: around 1200 BC, Egypt (under Merneptah and Ramesses III) was attacked by the mysterious *Sea Peoples*.

One theory holds that these migrations were themselves driven by drought and famine abroad, as "desperate […] raiders and refugees" were pushed eastward by climate disasters . Egypt barely repelled the Sea Peoples' invasions, but the wider Eastern Mediterranean suffered widespread collapse at that time. Indeed, modern climate data (e.g. fossil pollen and tree rings) indicate an unusually dry period in the late 13th–12th centuries BC, suggesting that droughts and resulting grain shortages destabilized the region, sharpening the impact of those invasions.

Military conflict and political turmoil further shaped Egyptian history. During the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1650–1550 BC), a foreign Semitic dynasty (the *Hyksos*) took control of the Nile Delta. Some evidence suggests the Hyksos infiltration was not a sudden conquest but a gradual migration that exploited Egypt's internal divisions, or possibly plague or famine; either way, their rise shows how external forces could capitalize on Egypt's weakness.

The native pharaohs eventually expelled the Hyksos and founded the New Kingdom, Egypt's imperial peak. Yet internal political struggles later undermined Egypt. By the late New Kingdom (c. 1100 BC), high priests of Amun amassed power, regional governors grew autonomous, and royal authority faltered, leading to a third intermediate era of fragmentation. In the final centuries BC, Egypt became a prize for foreign conquerors: first the Persians, then Alexander the Great, and ultimately Rome in 30 BC.

Notably, the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty (Greek rulers of Egypt) coincided with climatic trouble. Researchers have shown that a series of large volcanic eruptions in the 3rd–1st centuries BC caused global cooling that suppressed the Nile floods, reducing crop yields. Ptolemaic records describe subsequent unrest and revolts; for example, diminished floods in the 160s–140s BC (due to closely spaced eruptions) triggered famine and uprisings in Upper Egypt.

This convergence of natural disaster and internal strife weakened the kingdom. Ultimately, Cleopatra VII's late reign was marked by civil war and alliance with Rome, and after her defeat Egypt was absorbed into the Roman Empire.

In sum, Egypt's declines were often multipronged disasters: drought or eruption-induced crop failures provoked social turmoil, while foreign invasions or rebellions delivered the final blows.

MESOPOTAMIA

Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians

Mesopotamia – the "land between the rivers" Tigris and Euphrates – hosted some of the earliest states, each of which eventually fell due to both environmental and human factors. The Sumerian city-states (c. 3000–2000 BC) pioneered irrigation agriculture, but over centuries the soil became salinized and yields declined.

Sumer's independent cities were first united by Sargon of Akkad (2334 BC), whose dynasty created the Akkadian Empire. Sargon and his successors enjoyed a period of prosperity (aided by favorable

Ashurbanipal in a chariot, wall relief, 7th century BC, from Nineveh, the British Museum.

rains in northern Mesopotamia). However, the Akkadian Empire abruptly collapsed around 2190 BC. Scholars long blamed invasions by the Gutians – mountain tribes who swept down and toppled Akkadian rule. Indeed, contemporary chronicles describe Gutian incursions, and Akkad's last king was dethroned by these outsiders.

Yet climate science has revealed a deeper cause: the collapse coincides with the 4.2 ka drought. Geological and archaeological data (e.g. sediment cores from Mesopotamia and pollen records) indicate that rainfall sharply declined for several decades at the end of the 3rd millennium BC. This prolonged aridity would have devastated agriculture in both Mesopotamia and the upstream Fertile Crescent. A multi-proxy study from Syria's Tell Leilan

(ancient Akkadian outpost) shows a sudden, severe drought and dust storms at this time, consistent with the broader event. The result was famine, depopulation of cities, and political fragmentation. One source summarizes: "*The empire collapsed after the invasion of the Gutians. Changing climatic conditions also contributed to internal rivalries and fragmentation.*". In other words, drought-induced weakness invited the Gutian invasion, illustrating the one-two punch of climate stress and warfare.

Subsequent Mesopotamian polities also grappled with these forces. Nevertheless, after rainfall eventually improved, new kingdoms emerged. The Babylonian Empire under Hammurabi (c. 1700 BC) fell a century later, possibly due to Hittite raids (the Hittites sacked Babylon) combined with internal decline. The mid-2nd millennium saw Mitanni and Kassite dynasties compete, until the Assyrian Empire became dominant (c. 900–600 BC).

Assyria's expansion was fueled by a strong army and iron weapons, but brutal policies bred many enemies. Its collapse was swift: after decades of overextension and civil war, Assyria was hit by invasions from coalitions. In 612 BC a joint force of rebelling Babylonians and Medes captured Nineveh, effectively ending Assyrian power. Some climatologists note that Assyria's final century experienced volatile climate as well – inscriptions mention poor harvests and treasonous revolts – although war was the proximate cause of its fall.

The Neo-Babylonian Empire (626–539 BC) that succeeded it enjoyed a brief resurgence (Nebuchadnezzar's reign) before falling to the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 539 BC, largely via military conquest rather than environmental crisis. Throughout Mesopotamian history, however, water management remained a constant vulnerability. Shifts in river courses, drought, or flooding could spark famine and unrest, weakening these states against outside attack. Recent studies of ancient canal sediments and drought layers continue to refine our understanding of how climate swings influenced Mesopotamia's political timeline.

In sum, the rise and fall of Mesopotamian civilizations were shaped by fragile ecological conditions (droughts, soil degradation) and recurrent warfare (invasions by Gutians, Hittites, Arameans, Medes, Persians), often with one factor exacerbating the other.

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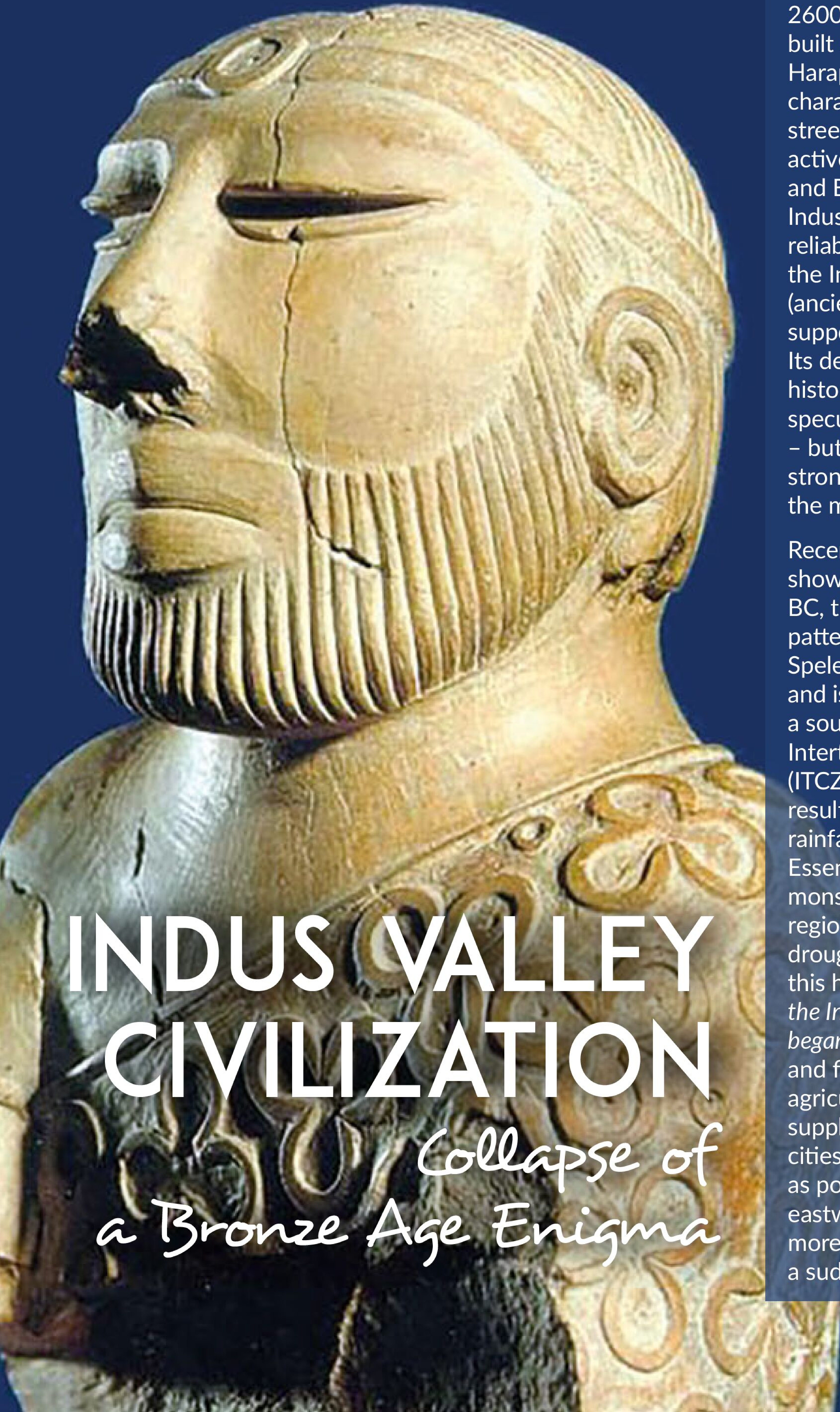


INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

Collapse of a Bronze Age Enigma

The Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2600–1900 BC) in South Asia built sophisticated cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, characterized by grid-planned streets, advanced drainage, and active trade with Mesopotamia and Egypt. For centuries, the Indus region benefited from reliable monsoon rains that fed the Indus and Ghaggar-Hakra (ancient Saraswati) rivers, supporting abundant agriculture. Its decline has long puzzled historians – early scholars once speculated about Aryan invaders – but current evidence points strongly to climate change as the main culprit.

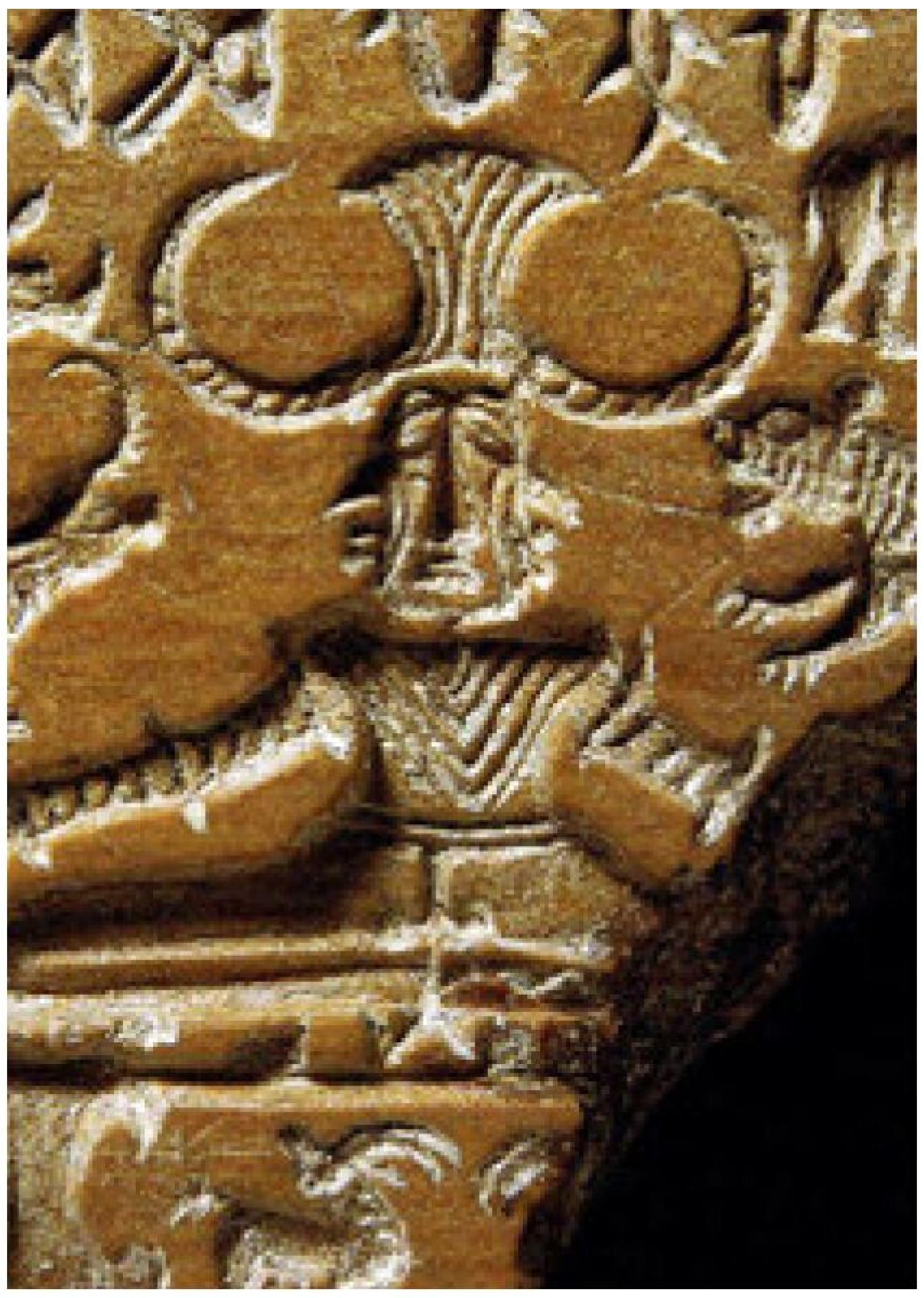
Recent geoscientific research shows that around 2100–1900 BC, the Indian summer monsoon pattern shifted dramatically. Speleothem (cave) records and isotopic data indicate a southward shift of the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) about 4,200 years ago, resulting in significantly reduced rainfall over the Indus basin. Essentially, the rain belt moved, monsoons weakened, and the region suffered a prolonged drought. One study notes that this happened "*precisely when the Indus Valley Civilization began to decline*". As river flow and floodwaters diminished, agriculture and urban water supplies faltered. The once-great cities were gradually abandoned as populations dispersed eastward toward areas with more dependable rain. Unlike a sudden military conquest, the Indus collapse appears to have been a drawn-out process of environmental degradation and social adaptation – large cities broke down into smaller rural communities.

Notably, new high-resolution climate data have verified this narrative. In 2024, climate scientists analyzing cave stalagmites in South India identified a multi-decade dry period ~2200 BC, triggered by a combination of factors: weaker solar radiation, more frequent *El Niño* events, a negative Indian Ocean Dipole, and the ITCZ shift. These factors *"triggered prolonged droughts in the Indus Valley"*. Moreover, paleo-river studies show that the Ghaggar-Hakra (Saraswati) river system was drying up around this time, likely due to monsoon decline and possibly tectonic river capture. As water became scarce, the economic base of the cities eroded.

Archaeologists have found evidence revealing that, by 1900 BC, many Indus urban sites were showing signs of stress: malnutrition in some burials, reduction in long-distance trade goods, and the disappearance of writing. However, there is little evidence of large-scale warfare or invasion at these sites – fortifications are minimal and skeletons do not show trauma patterns of battle. This undermines the older "Aryan invasion" theory;

instead, any incoming Indo-Aryan speaking groups likely migrated into an already de-urbanized landscape over subsequent centuries, rather than violently causing the collapse.

Interestingly, the demise of the Indus cities was not an absolute end: recent archaeological surveys indicate that many people migrated to smaller villages toward the Himalayan foothills or Ganges plain, adapting by shifting to local rain-fed farming. Thus, the Indus civilization's *collapse* was a transformation under environmental duress. Ongoing discoveries – from lake sediment cores to ancient DNA – continue to refine this picture, but the consensus is that climate change (a monsoon failure) was the decisive factor in the fall of one of the world's first urban cultures.



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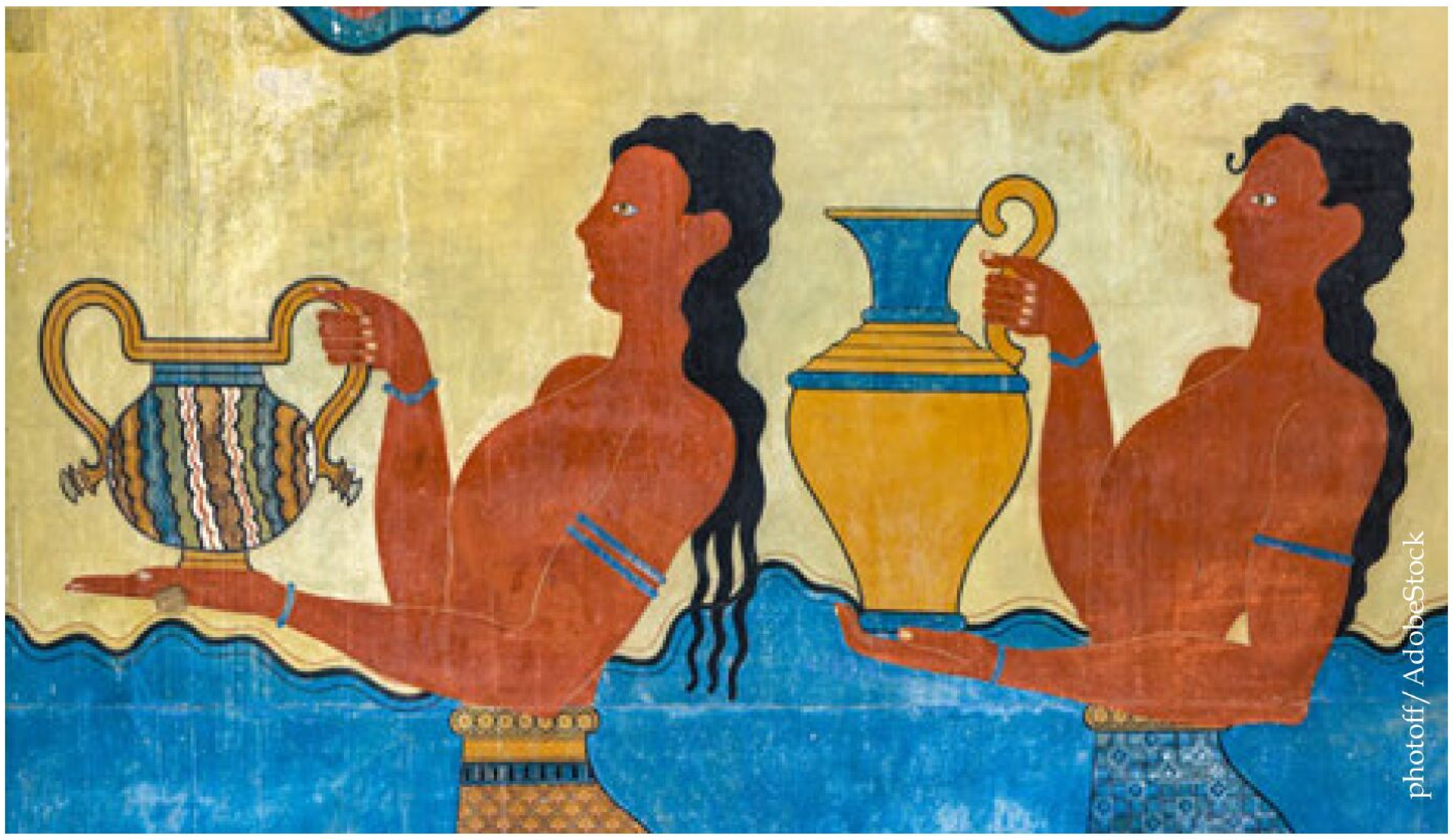
MINOANS

A Volcanic Shock and Aegean Competition

The Minoan civilization of Crete (c. 2000–1450 BC) was the Mediterranean’s first advanced Bronze Age society, famed for its palace centers like Knossos and its far-reaching maritime trade. The Minoans’ decline has been a subject of long debate, often centering on the cataclysmic Thera eruption.

Sometime between 1650–1600 BC, the volcano Thera (Santorini), north of Crete, erupted with a colossal force (VEI 7) – one of the largest eruptions in human history.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The explosion and its aftermath dealt a serious blow to Minoan Crete: the eruption obliterated the Minoan town on Thera (Akrotiri), sent tsunamis crashing into Crete's northern coast, and rained ash over a wide area. Coastal settlements and ports on Crete were likely devastated by tsunami flooding and ashfall.

While the exact chronological alignment is debated, this disaster occurred not long before many Minoan palaces on Crete were destroyed or abandoned. Traditionally, some historians linked the eruption directly to the end of Minoan civilization – portraying it as an abrupt apocalypse. However, current evidence suggests a more gradual decline.

The Minoans did survive the immediate eruption: the primary palace at Knossos endured into the later 16th and 15th centuries BC, and Minoan cultural influence persisted. Nonetheless, the eruption's indirect effects were significant. It likely caused short-term climatic cooling ("volcanic winter" effect) and crop failures across the region. Egyptian records like the *Tempest Stele* may allude to unusual storms possibly linked to the eruption's fallout, and even Chinese annals note odd skies and summer frost around the Shang dynasty's start, hinting at global atmospheric impacts.

In the aftermath, Minoan society faced economic and political strain. Trade networks were disrupted and villages in some affected zones never recovered. A compelling analysis by archaeologists Driessen and MacDonald argues that Thera's eruption precipitated a "gradual breakdown of the Minoan economy and ultimately their social and political system".

Juliars/AdobeStock

Environmental stress (crop shortfalls, loss of fleet capacity) would have eroded the palatial authorities' ability to redistribute resources and maintain order. Into this power vacuum stepped the Mycenaeans – the rising Bronze Age Greek civilization on the mainland. Archaeological evidence shows that around 1450 BC, many Cretan palaces (except Knossos) were violently destroyed and Mycenaean Greeks occupied Knossos soon after. Whether this was an outright Mycenaean invasion or internal revolt aided by Mycenaean opportunism, Crete came under mainland control. Thus, Minoan civilization didn't vanish overnight from the eruption alone; it was weakened by natural disaster and then conquered by rival powers.

Snake goddess from the Palace of Knossos.

By 1400 BC, the distinctive Minoan culture had been largely subsumed by Mycenaean Greek rule, marking its effective end. Recent interdisciplinary work reinforces this multi-causal scenario. For instance, geological studies have identified Bronze Age tsunami deposits on Crete's coast, confirming the eruption's destructive reach, while reassessments of pottery and writing suggest the *co-existence* and eventual blending of Minoan and Mycenaean elements rather than instant replacement.

In summary, volcanic climate impacts destabilized the Minoans and competitive warfare finished them off – a textbook case of the forces of nature and human rivals converging to topple a civilization.

GREEKS

Mycenaean Collapse to the End of the Hellenistic World

Ancient Greek civilization underwent multiple cycles of rise and fall. We can distinguish at least three phases – Mycenaean Greece, Classical Greece, and the Hellenistic period – each with its own challenges from climate, war, and internal strife.

Mycenaean Greece (c. 1600–1100 BC): The Mycenaeans were the Late Bronze Age Greeks who built fortified palace centers (Mycenae, Pylos, etc.) and dominated the Aegean after the decline of the Minoans. Their collapse around 1200 BC was part of the wider Late Bronze Age Collapse. Like their neighbors (the Hittites, Cypriots, Canaanites, etc.), the Mycenaean kingdoms were likely hit by prolonged droughts and crop failures at the end of the 13th century BC. Recent paleoclimate studies in the Mediterranean have detected a shift to drier conditions and even a multi-year extreme drought around 1198–1196 BC. This would have caused famine and social unrest. Indeed, archaeological signs of turmoil abound – many Mycenaean palaces and towns were destroyed by fire or abandoned.

While legends speak of the *Trojan War* and Dorian invasions, modern evidence points to a combination of internal rebellions and external attacks by roving groups (often associated with the "Sea Peoples" phenomenon). The correspondence from Ugarit (Syria) and Hattusa (Anatolia) at this time describes invasions and cities burning. The Mycenaeans, too, fell victim to this violence. Scholars like Eric Cline note it is no coincidence that "the worst famine years correspond with the invasion of the Sea Peoples" – desperation from drought likely drove both internal revolts and migrating warriors. By 1100 BC, Mycenaean political authority had disintegrated, leading to a Greek Dark Age (with reduced population and literacy) for the next few centuries. So climate-triggered food shortages set the stage, and waves of warfare delivered the coup de grâce to Bronze Age Greek civilization.

Classical Greece (c. 500–323 BC): The resurgence of Greek civilization in the Iron Age led to the rise of the famed city-states like Athens and Sparta. This era's rise and fall – the "Greek Golden Age" – owed more to human innovation (political and philosophical) than climate, as Greece's climate was relatively stable in the 5th century BC. However, specific events show environmental factors and disease still played a role.

For instance, during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) between Athens and Sparta, overcrowded Athens was struck by a devastating plague in 430 BC, which killed perhaps a quarter of its people (including leader Pericles) and sapped Athenian strength. Modern analyses of DNA from an ancient burial pit suggest this plague may have been an early typhoid fever – not climate-related, but a reminder of nature's impact amidst war. The Peloponnesian War itself, a long and bitter conflict, exemplified how internal strife and war weakened Greek

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civilization. The war exhausted the major city-states; afterwards, Sparta, Athens, and Thebes each struggled for dominance, while economically the poleis were drained. This opened Greece to outside intervention.

In 338 BC, Philip II of Macedon defeated the southern Greeks, effectively ending their independence. Philip's son, Alexander the Great, went on to conquer the Persian Empire, ushering in the next phase. Importantly, throughout Classical Greece, political problems periodically undermined stability: factional stasis (civil strife) within cities, class conflicts (e.g. democratic upheavals vs. oligarchic coups in Athens), and the difficulties in maintaining alliances like the Delian League. These internal issues often made the Greek cities vulnerable to the larger Macedonian army.

Hellenistic Period (323–30 BC): After Alexander's death, his empire fragmented among his generals (the Diadochi). The Hellenistic kingdoms (Ptolemaic Egypt, Seleucid Asia, Antigonid Macedonia, etc.) initially flourished, spreading Greek culture widely. But their political history was tumultuous, marked by almost incessant warfare with each other (e.g. the Syrian Wars between the Seleucids and Ptolemies) and by dynastic intrigues (court assassinations, sibling rivalries for thrones). These internal weaknesses eventually made them easy prey for the rising power of Rome.

One by one, the Hellenistic states fell: Macedonia was conquered by Rome in 168 BC, the Seleucid realm was absorbed by 64 BC, and famously Cleopatra's Egypt – the last Hellenistic kingdom – fell in 30 BC after her defeat (alongside Mark Antony) by Octavian. Climate factors are less documented in this period, though some studies suggest that the eastern Mediterranean had generally favorable conditions in the 3rd–2nd centuries BC. One exception may be the volcanic eruption of 168 BC (likely an Alaska volcano, per ice-core records) which, combined with three other eruptions in quick succession, caused a cluster of low Nile floods and economic distress in Egypt. This coincided with political unrest in Ptolemaic Egypt as mentioned earlier.

In Greece and Macedon, environmental change does not feature prominently in the historical sources at the time of Roman conquest; it was military might and internal decay that sealed their fate. Recent archaeological findings, such as isotope analysis of Athenian wells, do hint at minor drought episodes in the late 4th century BC, but nothing on the scale of earlier collapses. Ultimately, the Greek world's falls were driven by war and politics – costly internecine wars that eroded classical Greece, and then Roman imperialism overwhelming the squabbling Hellenistic states. The cultural legacy remained, but political autonomy was lost until modern times.

CHINESE DYNASTIES

Mandate of Heaven and Climate Cycles

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Chinese civilization presents a recurring pattern of dynastic rise and fall, often explained by later historians as the loss of the "Mandate of Heaven" due to misrule. Modern evidence suggests these collapses often coincided with climatic shifts causing economic distress, coupled with rebellions or invasions. From the Bronze Age Shang to the late imperial Qing, we see this interplay repeatedly:

The Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BC) was an early state along the Yellow River. It fell when King Zhou of Shang was overthrown by the Zhou clan. Traditional accounts blame Shang decadence, but there may have been environmental factors too: Chinese records (like the Bamboo Annals) intriguingly mention bizarre climate events (e.g. frost in July, multiple suns in the sky) around the time of the Shang collapse, which some have speculatively linked to the distant Santorini eruption or other disturbances. In any case, warfare – the Battle of Muye in 1046 BC – decisively ended Shang, establishing the Zhou dynasty.

The Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC) eventually fragmented during its latter half (the Eastern Zhou), devolving into the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Here, constant warfare between rival states (Qin, Chu, Qi, etc.) was the key factor; however, climate may have played a role in shaping this era too. The Yellow River valley is prone to droughts and locusts; some scholars have correlated peaks of war frequency with times of crop failure. The end of Zhou came when the state

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of Qin unified China in 221 BC through conquest. The short-lived Qin dynasty collapsed by 207 BC amidst peasant rebellions – a textbook case of internal strife due to harsh authoritarian policies and perhaps overextension.

The Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 220) is a prime example of a prosperous era destabilized by both internal issues and external/ climate pressures. Early Han benefitted from stable climate (some studies indicate a humid, monsoon-favorable period. But in the late 2nd century AD, Han China was hit by natural disasters (floods of the Yellow River as well as droughts in other regions) and epidemics.

Around 180–170 AD, locust plagues and drought led to famine in North China, fueling discontent. In 184 AD, the massive Yellow Turban Rebellion broke out – a peasant revolt influenced by starvation and millenarian beliefs – severely weakening the Han. Soon warlords carved up the realm, and by 220 AD Han authority had dissolved into the Three Kingdoms period of civil war. Climate data from tree rings and stalagmites show that the late 2nd–3rd century saw variable rainfall and possible cooling – conditions that could depress agrarian output. Additionally, the Han faced external pressure from nomadic confederations (Xiongnu, etc.), whose movements in turn might have been driven by steppe aridity or cold spells. The Han collapse illustrates the typical pattern: ecological distress -> peasant uprisings -> fragmentation -> invasion.

Later dynasties continued this cycle. The Tang dynasty (618–907 AD), for example, ruled during what climate proxies show as a relatively cool phase with weaker monsoons. Tang's golden age was mid-8th century, but by the late 8th–9th century it encountered the devastating An Lushan Rebellion (755–763) – a civil war that cost millions of lives and irreparably weakened the state. Historical climatology suggests that in the early 9th century parts of China had droughts and famine, which likely exacerbated the instability. Tang authority waned and warlord factions fought until the dynasty fell.

Fast-forwarding, the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) provides a well-documented case of climate-driven crisis: the late Ming experienced the Little Ice Age cooling. From the 1580s onward, China suffered a sequence of unusual droughts and cold winters (the so-called Wanli Emperor's reign faced the "Wanli Megadrought"). Grain harvests plummeted – one reconstruction shows grain yields declined 20–50% per capita due to drought in the early 17th century. This fueled unrest such as the peasant rebellions led by Li Zicheng. Ming also faced renewed nomadic invasions (the Manchu from the northeast). The weakest monsoon period of the millennium (1500–1650 AD) coincided exactly with Ming's collapse. As one report notes, deteriorating climate in Ming China "*lead to uprisings that overthrew the dynasty.*".

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The Qing dynasty (Manchu) that followed initially managed the crisis (Qing rulers employed famine relief measures), but even Qing was not immune to nature – the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-19th century, one of the deadliest civil wars ever, occurred during another difficult climate phase (the mid-1800s saw floods and droughts in different regions).

In summary, Chinese dynasties frequently rose during periods of climatic stability and prosperity and fell when the climate worsened, often in tandem with rebellions and invasions. Modern science has made this link concrete: a 2000-year speleothem (cave mineral) record from China shows that weaker monsoon periods correlated with times of dynastic upheaval. Strong monsoon/rainfall regimes meant agricultural abundance and stable rule, whereas sustained droughts or cold epochs led to famine, rebellion, and regime change. Of course, human factors (corruption, mismanagement, inequitable land distribution) determined whether a dynasty could withstand the stress. But as new data (tree rings, ice cores, and written records) confirm, climate change was a significant stressor that repeatedly set the stage for Chinese political collapse.

JAPAN

Yayoi Transformation and State Formation

Japan's ancient trajectory was somewhat different – rather than a dramatic "collapse" of a single civilization, it involved the transition from the Jōmon hunter-gatherers to the Yayoi agricultural society, and the gradual formation of a unified state. Climate and outside influence played roles in these changes.

The Yayoi period (c. 300 BC – 300 AD) saw the introduction of wet-rice farming, metal tools, and new pottery styles, likely brought by migrants from Korea or China. This transition may have been encouraged by environmental conditions: the earlier Jōmon period coincided with a mid-Holocene warm phase, but by around 1000 BC the climate in Japan was cooling and becoming slightly drier, which could have made the hunter-gatherer lifestyle less sustainable and rice agriculture more attractive (though research is ongoing). In any case, the Yayoi people dramatically increased food production, leading to population growth and the first social stratification in Japan. Yayoi villages sometimes had defensive moats and wooden stockades, indicating internecine warfare among clans. As agriculture took hold, competition for rice paddies and water likely sparked conflicts.

By the late Yayoi, large regional chiefdoms emerged, setting the stage for state formation in the Kofun period (c. 250–538 AD). Chinese historical chronicles provide valuable insights: the *Wei Zhi* (Account of the Wa People, 3rd century AD) describes Japan (Wa) as a land of many small kingdoms that constanty fought, until eventually coming under the rule of a queen named Himiko. After years of warfare among rival chieftains, Himiko of Yamatai unified many clans around the mid-3rd century AD, implying a period of civil strife followed by consolidation through either diplomacy or force. This suggests that internal conflict was a major factor in early Japanese political development. After Himiko, another period of disorder followed, until the Yamato clan in the Kofun era gradually asserted hegemony over central and western Japan. The Yamato rulers (proto-emperors) cultivated ties with Korea and China, obtaining iron weapons and advanced technology that helped them dominate.

Climate-changing events did influence Japan intermittently.

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For instance, around 536 AD, a global volcanic eruption (possibly Icelandic) caused a “year without summer” worldwide – Japanese records in the Asuka period mention unusual cold and famine around that time. Such stresses might have spurred reforms: by the late 6th and 7th centuries, Japan’s rulers were adopting Chinese-style governance (the Taika Reforms of 645 AD) to strengthen central control, perhaps in response to both internal pressures and external threats (like the possibility of invasion by Tang China). In general, natural disasters like typhoons, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions were part of the Japanese experience (e.g. the Aso volcano eruption around 90 BC affected Kyushu, and later the great eruption of Mount Fuji in 864 AD), but the early state showed resilience.

The lack of major collapse in early Japan might be attributed to its relatively late development of state structures – by the time a complex state existed (Yamato), the rulers could implement measures (granaries, religious rites) to mitigate famine and maintain authority. Moreover, Japan’s isolation meant it was spared large-scale invasion in this early era (except for continental influence in culture and small-scale migrations). Recent archaeological discoveries, such as colossal Yayoi-period moated settlements and rich grave goods in kofun tombs, illuminate how warfare and alliance-building progressively knit Japan together. Advances in ancient DNA have also revealed that Yayoi migrants intermarried with Jōmon people, suggesting a cultural amalgamation rather than one group’s extinction.

So, instead of a sharp “rise and fall,” Japan’s ancient history is a story of transition and unification: the introduction of agriculture (possibly climate-assisted), periods of warring clans, and ultimately the emergence of a centralized kingdom by the 7th century. Internal power struggles continued (court intrigues, regional rebellions), but Japan did not experience a total civilizational collapse in antiquity – rather, it evolved into the continuous imperial line that, remarkably, survives to this day.

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VIKINGS

Norse Expansion and the Greenland Experiment

The Vikings (Norse seafarers from Scandinavia) are known for their explosive expansion during the Medieval Warm Period and their later retreats as conditions changed. In the late 8th century (793 AD), Viking raiders struck the English monastery of Lindisfarne, marking the start of two centuries of Norse expansion. A period of relatively mild climate in the North Atlantic (c. 800–1200 AD) created favorable conditions: harbors remained ice-free longer and harvests in Scandinavia improved, facilitating population growth and long-distance voyages.

Vikings took to the seas, conducting raids and also settling new lands. They colonized Iceland (870s AD) and Greenland (c. 985 AD) during this warm phase.

In these exploits warfare was front and center – Vikings were skilled warriors whose shallow-draft longships allowed lightning

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raids on European coasts and rivers. They plundered wealth from monasteries and towns, but also established trade networks and cities (like Dublin in Ireland, originally a Viking base). Norse armies even penetrated inland Europe; for example, they besieged Paris in 845 AD and became a feared force. Over time, some Viking bands transitioned from raiders to conquerors: one group seized northern France and founded Normandy (911 AD), others carved out the Danelaw in England. In the East, Swedish Norse (Varangians) traveled the rivers to Byzantium and formed the Rus' state. Military success and bold exploration characterized the Viking rise.

However, as Viking communities settled in, political changes and climatic cooling curbed their expansion. By the late 10th and 11th centuries, the Scandinavian homelands were converting to Christianity and forming centralized kingdoms (Denmark, Norway, Sweden). Kings like Harald Bluetooth and Olaf Tryggvason began to discourage independent raiding in favor of organized kingdoms.

The famous Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, where the English King Harold Godwinson defeated Harald Hardrada of Norway, is often cited as the end of the Viking Age of raids – thereafter, Scandinavian powers focused more on internal consolidation or Crusades than on marauding abroad. Meanwhile, the Norse far-flung colonies faced environmental challenges.

The Viking settlement in Greenland provides a poignant example. When Erik the Red established the Eastern Settlement in Greenland (c. 985), conditions were comparatively mild (Greenland then had enough pastureland for Norse cattle and sheep). But over the next few centuries, the climate underwent a downturn, and by the 14th century the Little Ice Age had begun to impact the North Atlantic.

Researchers have reconstructed the conditions of the climate, showing that temperatures plunged several degrees and weather grew erratic in Greenland leading up to the Norse disappearance. The Norse Greenlanders, who relied on marginal farming and the trade of walrus ivory, struggled as pastures failed and sea ice increased (cutting off shipping lanes). One study found that near the time when the Greenland colony collapsed, the climate became "exceptionally erratic and unstable with record high and low temperatures" before a sustained cold – conditions that undermined the viability of the Norse lifestyle.

Isotopic analysis of Norse bones shows a shift towards a more seafood-based diet in later years, implying they were adapting to declining farm

Vikarest/ AdobeStock

output, but perhaps not fast or fully enough. By the early 15th century, the Greenland Norse settlements were abandoned – whether the last settlers died of starvation, migrated back to Iceland/Europe, or were killed by the Inuit or by disease is still debated, but climate-driven ecological collapse was clearly a major factor.

Elsewhere, other Viking endeavors met different fates. The Vikings who reached North America around 1000 AD (the site at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland) only stayed a few years. Saga accounts and archaeology suggest conflicts with indigenous peoples (whom the Norse called *Skrælings*) and the difficulty of obtaining supplies led them to withdraw.

Fascinatingly, modern science has pinned an exact date to the Norse presence in the Americas: tree-ring evidence of a cosmic-ray event shows that Vikings were cutting wood at L'Anse aux Meadows in 1021 AD. This underscores that the Norse did achieve transatlantic travel and a formed a temporary colony, but they lacked the numbers and stability to maintain it.

Back in Europe, by the 1100s–1200s, Scandinavian societies had largely integrated into Christian medieval civilization. The Norse descendants in places like Normandy and Sicily became Normans, who ironically carried out their own conquests (e.g. in 1066, William of Normandy, of Viking stock, conquered England). In the north, the last vestiges of Viking isolation ended when Greenland was finally reached by a Norwegian mission in the early 18th century (they found only ruins), and Iceland suffered through the colder climate but survived under Norwegian/Danish rule.

In sum, the rise of the Vikings was enabled by a favorable climate and decentralized, adventurous ethos, while their decline resulted from political centralization (ending the raiding lifestyle) and climate deterioration, particularly impacting remote settlements. New interdisciplinary evidence from ice cores, sediment, and saga corroboration has verified this hypothesis – for example, it's been shown that in addition to cooling, sea-level rise due to local ice sheet growth may have flooded Viking farms in Greenland, and volcanic eruptions (1257 Samalas eruption) contributed to harsh winters.

The case of the Vikings demonstrates the power of human adaptability (sailing to new worlds), yet also reveals a vulnerability to climate swings beyond human control.

CONCLUSION

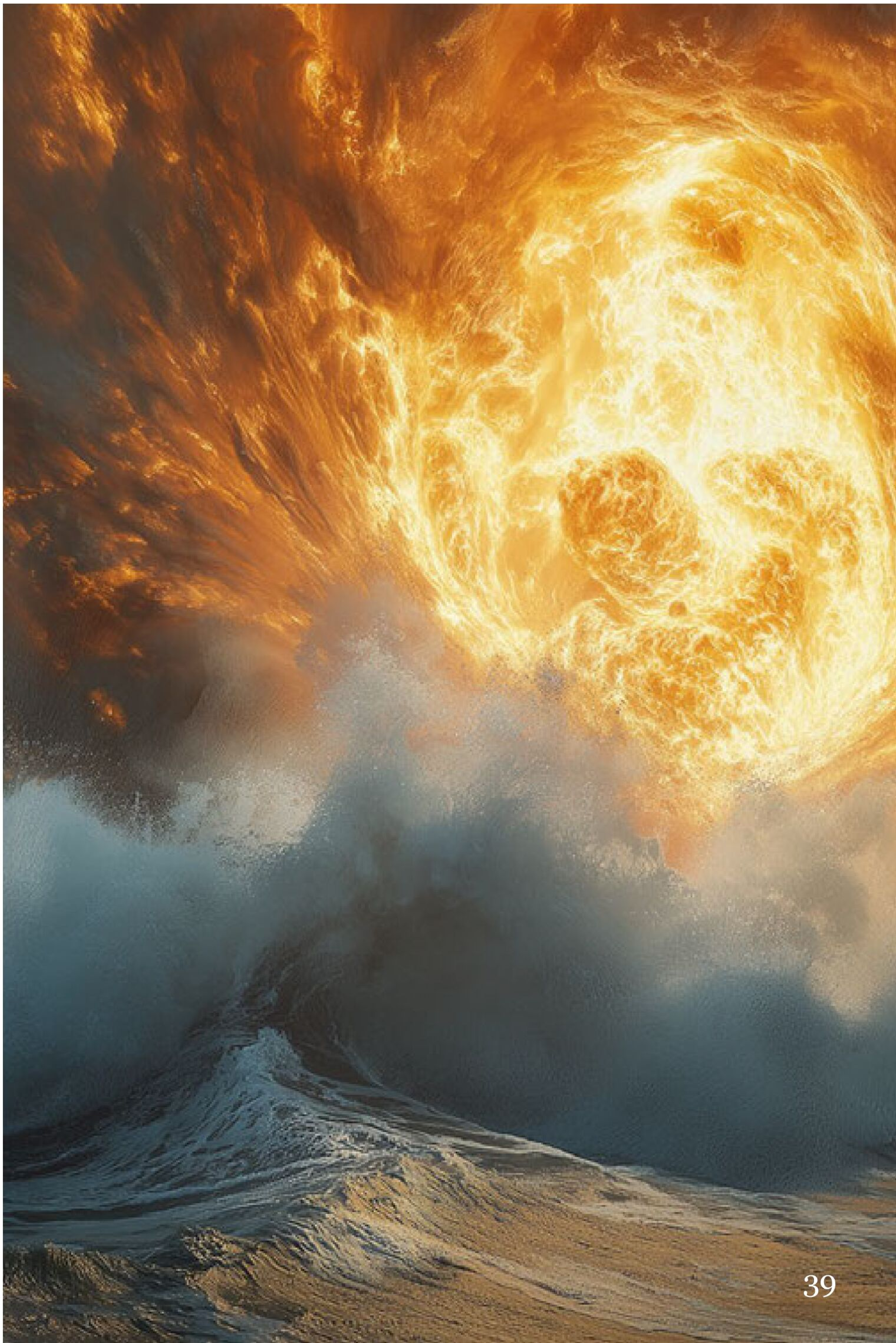
From the Old Kingdom Egyptians gazing at a dwindling Nile to the last Norse farmers struggling in a cooling Greenland, we see recurring themes in the rise and fall of civilizations.

Climate change – in the form of droughts, cooling/warming periods, or volcanic winters – often acted as an *ultimate stressor*, undermining food supplies and social order. These stresses frequently coincided with or precipitated wars and migrations: hunger and desperation could spark invasions (as with the Sea Peoples or the Huns) or rebellions (as in Ptolemaic Egypt and late Ming China). Meanwhile, political fragility and internal conflicts determined whether a society could withstand shocks.

Capable governance and social cohesion sometimes allowed civilizations to ride out moderate climate events (for example, early Han China's stability during a humid phase, or Rome at its height during the Roman Warm Period). But when maladministration, corruption, or civil strife had already weakened the state, even a minor drought or defeat could trigger collapse.

Recent scientific and archaeological breakthroughs richly illustrate these connections: ice cores and tree rings align with historical turning points, isotope analyses reveal famine periods, and ancient DNA and texts clarify the human side of the story. Rather than a single-cause "decline and fall," it is now understood that most civilizations succumbed to a *synergy of forces*. Environmental change, warfare, and internal decay interacted in complex ways – a drought might lead to war; war devastation might exacerbate famine; internal disunity might invite conquest, and so on.

By studying these past collapses with tools from climatology, archaeology, and history combined, we gain not only a clearer picture of how and why ancient societies fell, but also cautionary insights into the resilience (or fragility) of our own. Each of these ancient stories reinforces that human societies are deeply entwined with their environment, and that adaptability, good leadership, and social unity are crucial defenses against the ever-changing challenges of nature and geopolitics.



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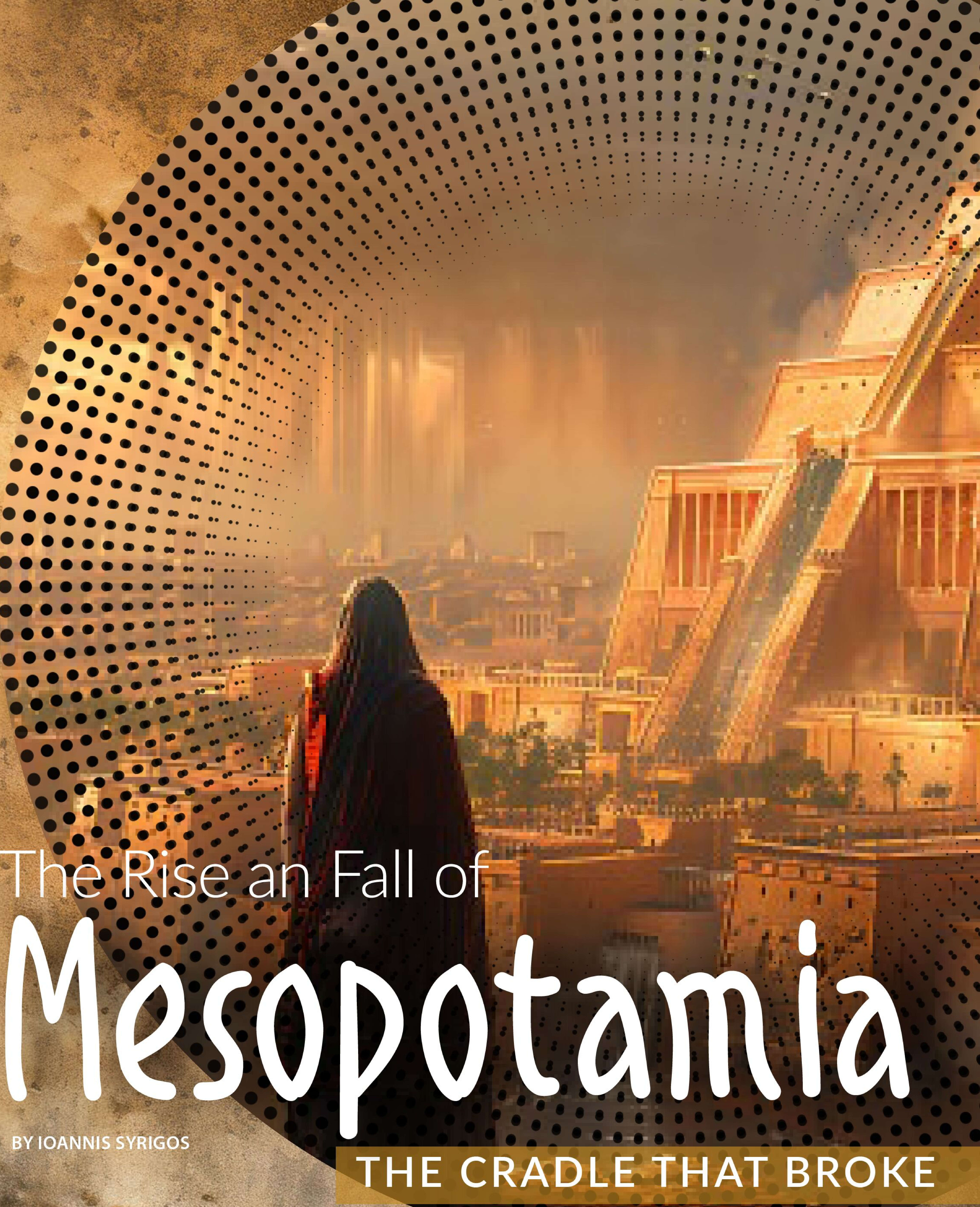


The Rise an Fall of Mesopotamia

THE CRADLE THAT BROKE

BY IOANNIS SYRIGOS

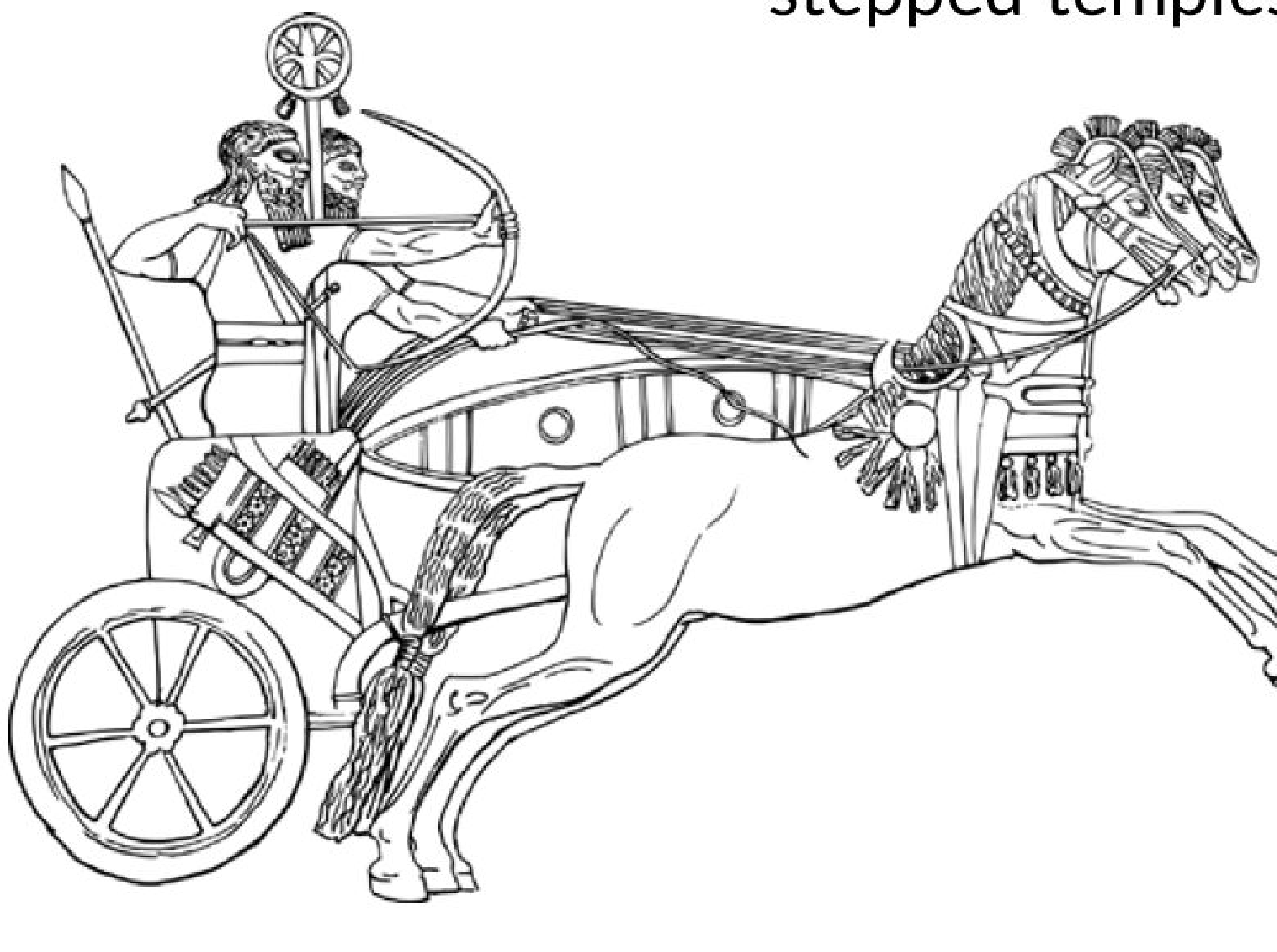
Picture a sun-bleached expanse where two rivers—the Tigris and Euphrates—slice through the dust, cradling a civilization so old it makes Rome look like a late bloomer. This is Mesopotamia, the "land between rivers," where humanity first scribbled its ambitions into clay, forged cities from mud, and distilled barley into beer long before Silicon Valley dreamed of disruption. It's the original proving ground of urban life, a sprawling experiment in power and ingenuity that soared to dizzying heights before crumbling under its own weight.

God Nabu's attendant from Nimrud, Iraq. British Museum.

From Sumerian scribes to Babylonian despots, here's the unvarnished tale of how Mesopotamia clawed its way to greatness—and why it couldn't hold on.

The Rise: From Silt to Supremacy (c. 4500 BCE–2000 BCE)

Mesopotamia didn't explode onto the scene—it seeped in. Around 10,000 BCE, nomadic bands in modern-day Iraq tamed the wild rivers, turning their erratic floods into fields of barley and wheat. The Tigris and Euphrates were capricious—swelling without warning, drying up when crops begged for water—but their silt was a farmer's goldmine. By 4500 BCE, hamlets like Eridu emerged, and soon the Sumerians, history's first city-dwellers, turned a muddy nowhere into the nerve center of civilization.



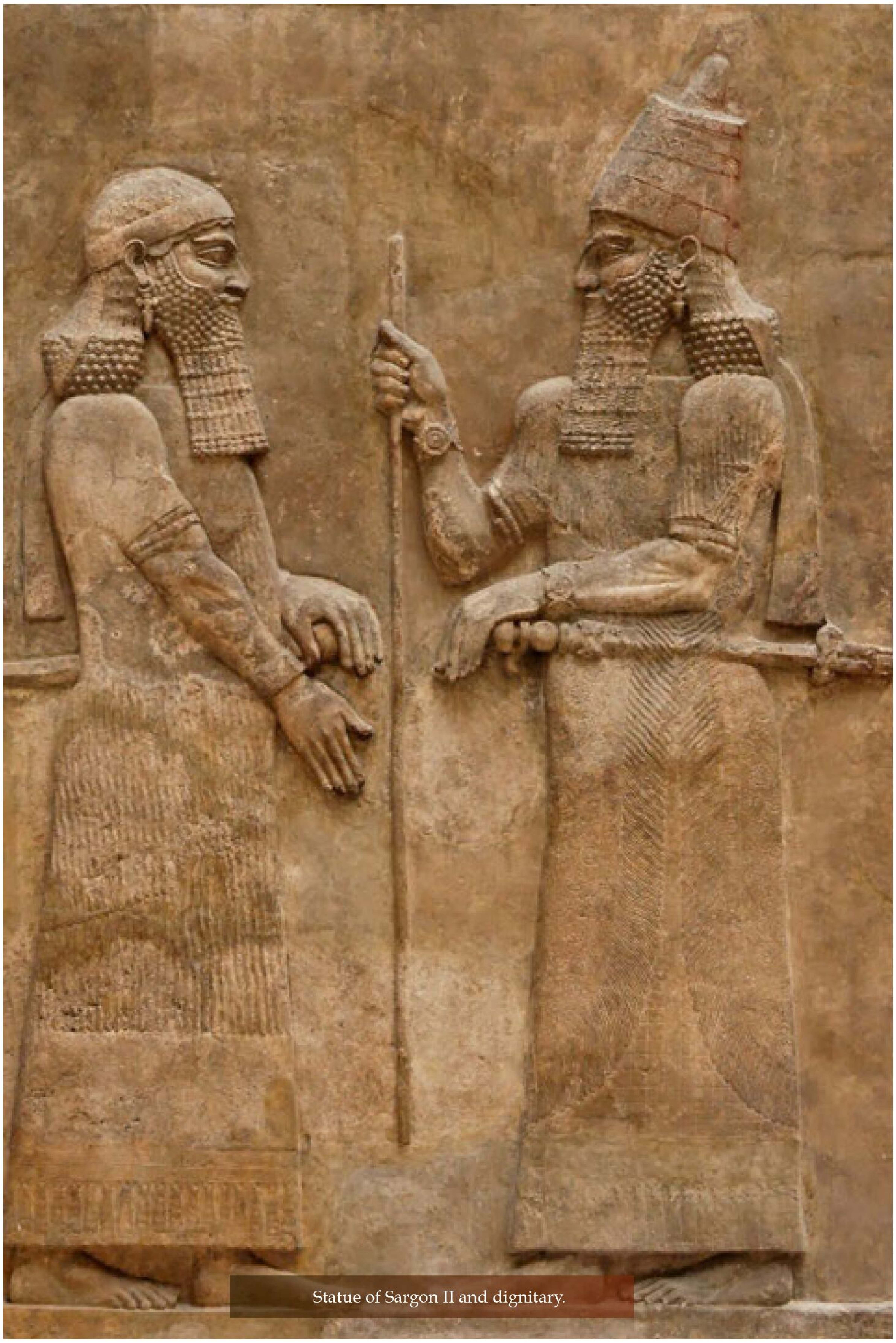
In southern Mesopotamia, Sumer kicked things off around 3500 BCE. With no stone or timber to spare, they molded sun-baked bricks into urban sprawl—Uruk, Ur, Lagash—settlements that were raw and functional. Uruk, the heavyweight, swelled to 50,000 souls, its skyline stabbed by ziggurats, those towering stepped temples where priest-kings held court, claiming divine endorsement to keep the masses in line. These were power trips,

MayIndarwati/ adobestock

and they were also economic engines, tracking grain and beer with cuneiform—the world's first writing—etched into clay. Beer, by the way, was a cultural cornerstone; they slurped it through reeds to filter the sludge, a ritual as practical as it was boozy.

Sumerians were relentless innovators. They gave us the wheel, tracked constellations, and devised a base-60 math system—hence the 60-minute hour. By 3000 BCE, their city-states were beehives of trading activity—copper from Oman, cedar from Lebanon—while bickering over irrigation rights sparked endless skirmishes. Their ingenuity shone in figures like Gilgamesh, the semi-mythical king of Uruk, whose Epic—a brutal saga of floods and existential dread—remains the oldest written story in the world.

Then came Sargon of Akkad in


Statue of Sargon II and dignitary.

Statue of the sumerian ruler Gudea of Lagash.

Ashurbanipal II's army attacking Memphis, Egypt, 645-635 BCE, from Nineveh, Iraq. British Museum, London.

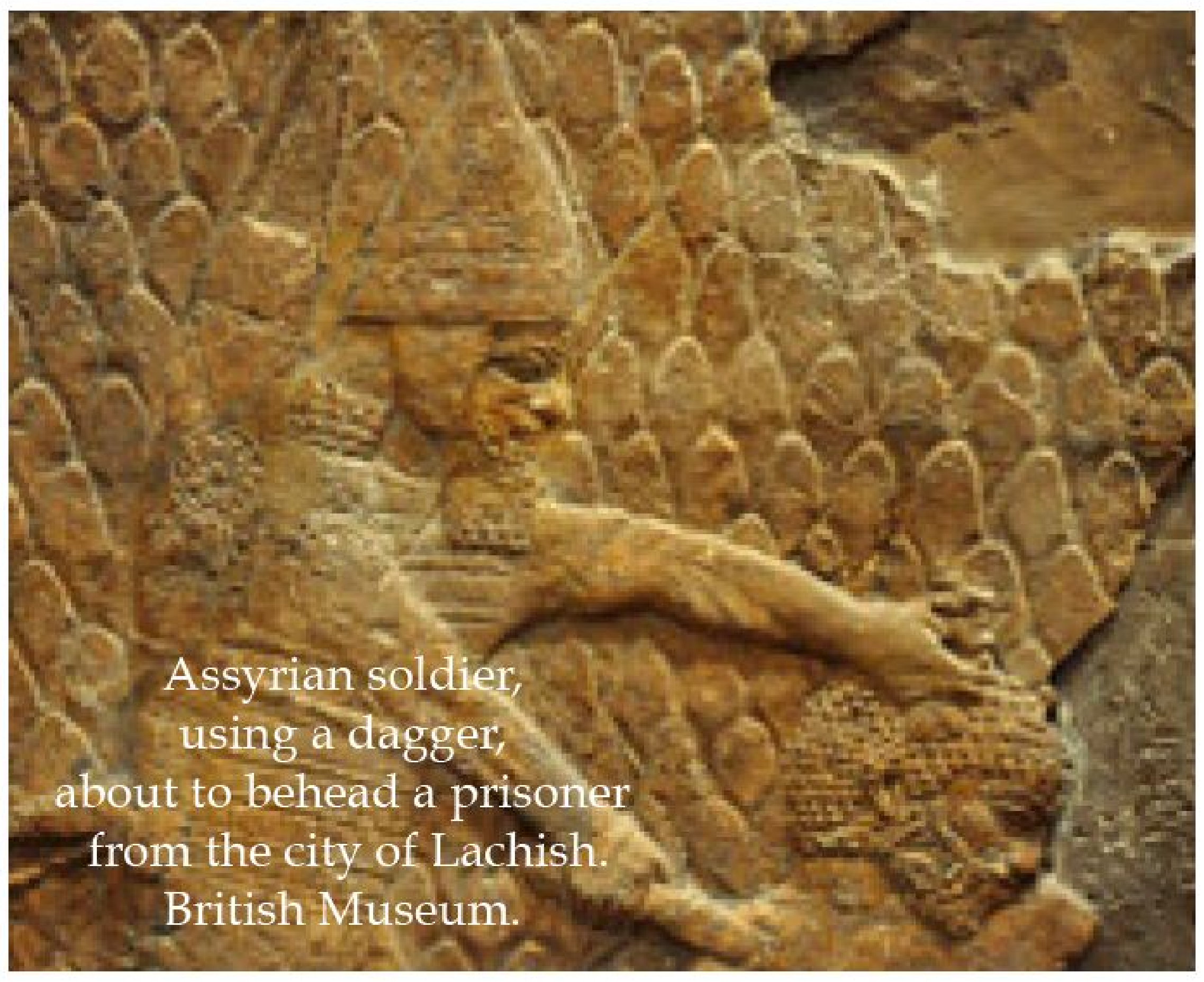
2334 BCE, a self-made warlord who bootstrapped his way from nothing—legend says his mother abandoned him in a river basket—to forging the Akkadian Empire. He absorbed Sumer's fractious cities into the first multi-ethnic dominion, stretching from the Persian Gulf to Syria. Akkadian replaced Sumerian as the lingua franca, but the culture endured, propped up by bronze blades and sheer audacity. When Akkad faltered—drought and revolts gnawing at its edges—the Sumerians staged a comeback around 2100 BCE. Ur's Third Dynasty flaunted wealth: a ziggurat that still looms over Iraq, and tombs stuffed with gold daggers and a queen's headdress dripping with opulence.

> Sumerians pegged the liver as the soul's throne, so priests gutted sheep to divine the gods' moods—entrails as oracles, a bloody hotline to the cosmos.

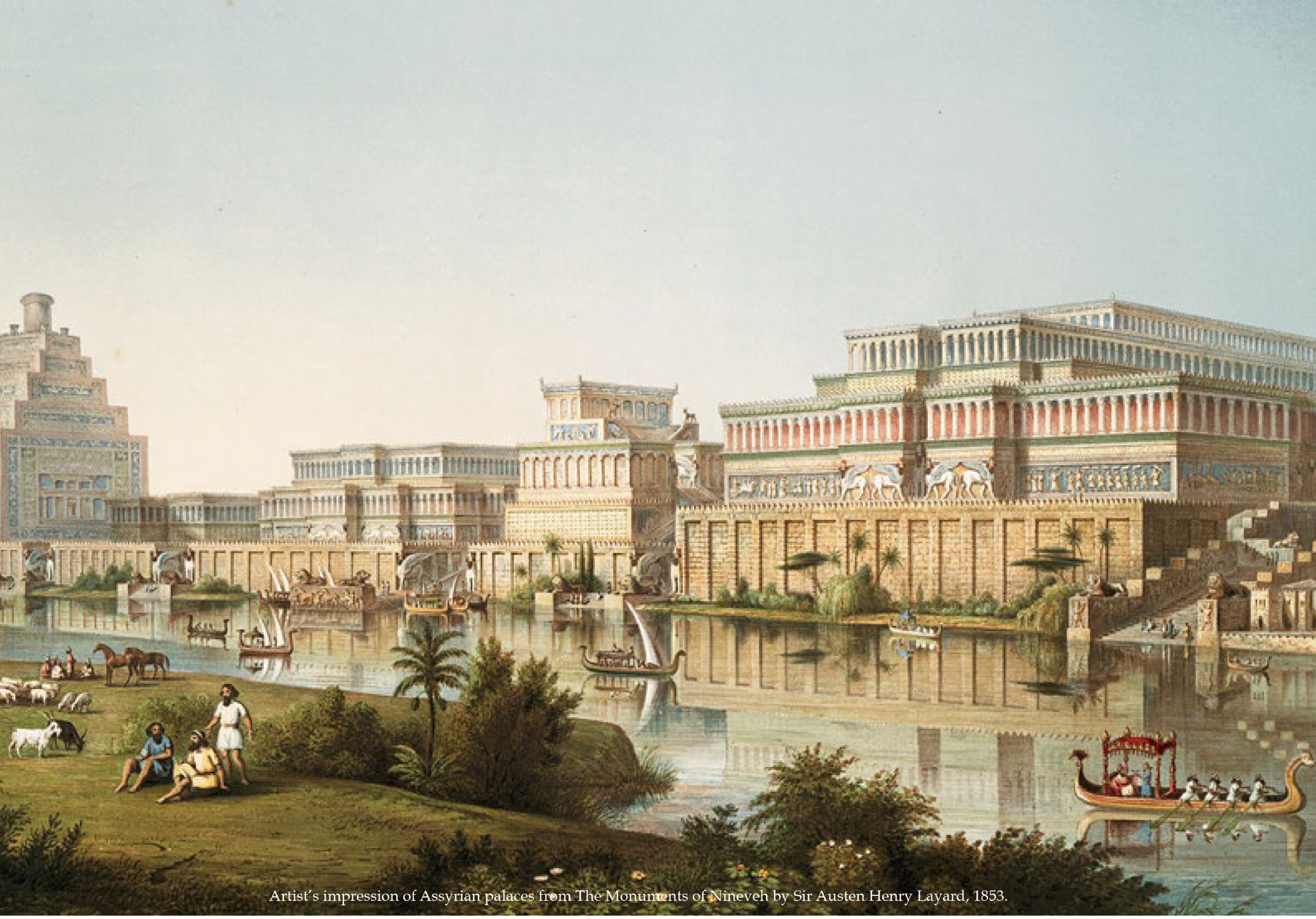
The Peak: Empires of Excess (2000 BCE–1000 BCE)

Mesopotamia hit its zenith with a roster of ruthless visionaries. Around 1894 BCE, the Amorites—former nomads with a knack for reinvention—planted Babylon on the Euphrates. Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 BCE) turned it into a powerhouse, his Code—282 laws carved on a basalt slab—dishing out retribution and regulation in equal measure. Eye-for-an-eye justice met rules for trade and marriage; Babylon thrived as a nexus of commerce and intellect, its libraries hoarding clay tablets like ancient hard drives.

Northward, the Assyrians brewed their own brand of dominance. From merchants in Assur around 2000 BCE, they morphed into a war machine by 1300 BCE. Kings like Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 BCE) reveled in carnage, stacking enemy skulls into grisly monuments—propaganda with



Assyrian soldier, using a dagger, about to behead a prisoner from the city of Lachish. British Museum.



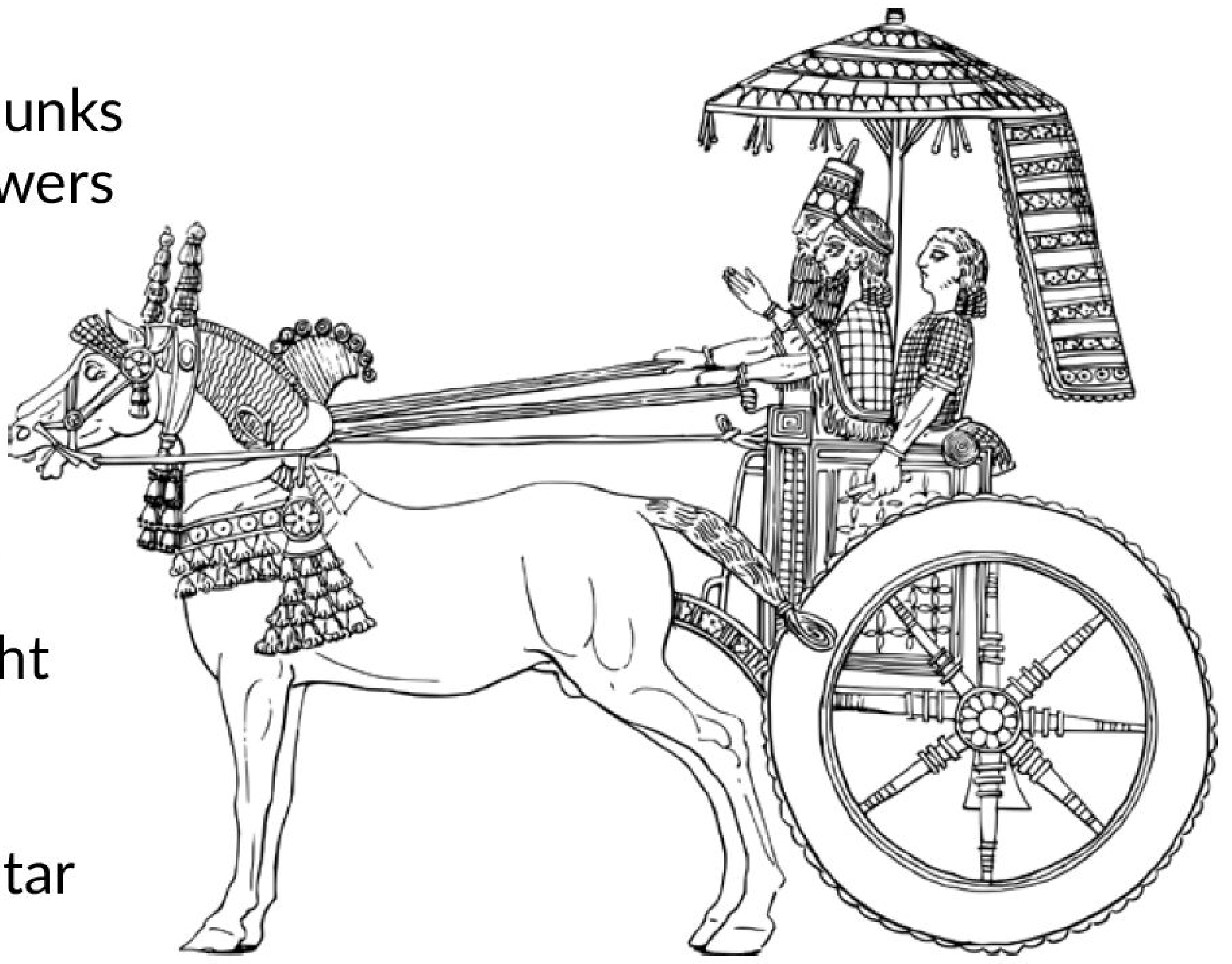
Artist's impression of Assyrian palaces from The Monuments of Nineveh by Sir Austen Henry Layard, 1853.

sofian/adobestock

> Assyrians skinned their enemies and draped the hides on palace walls—macabre trophies masquerading as decor.

a body count. Their empire swallowed Syria, Israel, and chunks of Egypt, powered by siege towers and mass-produced iron weapons. Nineveh, their capital, was a fortress of excess, its reliefs boasting of conquests over flayed foes.

Babylon reclaimed the spotlight under Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605–562 BCE), who rebuilt it into a spectacle—think the Ishtar Gate, a turquoise marvel of lions and dragons, and the Hanging Gardens, if they weren't just hype. He sacked Jerusalem in 587 BCE, exiling the Jews, while his astronomers mapped the heavens, birthing the zodiac that still haunts your dating profile. This was Mesopotamia's high-water mark: dazzling, brutal, and teetering on the edge. The rivers that



Assyrian enemies impaled.

sustained it were a double-edged sword—floods ravaged crops, and irrigation salted the soil into barren waste.

The Fall: Overreach and Oblivion (1000 BCE–539 BCE and Beyond)

The good times couldn't last—Mesopotamia's ambitions surpassed its reach. By 1000 BCE, Assyria's iron-fisted sprawl bred resentment; rebels and rivals like the Arameans chipped away. A resurgence in 911 BCE couldn't save them—Nineveh fell in 612 BCE to a Babylonian-Mede coalition, its palaces torched, its legacy reduced to eerie lion-hunt carvings.

Babylon's encore was brief. In 539 BCE, Persia's Cyrus the Great strolled in, bloodlessly annexing it into his empire—a masterstroke of diplomacy over swords. The rivers flowed on, but the luster dimmed. Alexander the Great seized it in 331 BCE, eyeing a reborn Babylon, only to die in its palace, his dreams fracturing among squabbling successors. The Parthians took over by 141 BCE, pivoting east.

Angelina/AdobeStock

Babylonians feared eclipses as divine wrath, subbing in a disposable “king” to take the hit—cynical pragmatism at its finest.

The end wasn’t dramatic—it was a slow bleed. Rome sparred with Parthia over the region, but Trajan bailed in 116 CE—too distant, too damned hot. The Sassanids ruled from 226 CE until the Arabs swept in by 651 CE, ushering in Islam and Baghdad’s rise. Mesopotamia’s ancient cores—Ur, Babylon, Nineveh—sank into obscurity, choked by sand and silted canals. Salinity wrecked the fields, populations dwindled, and by the Middle Ages, it was a ghostland, its ziggurats mere curiosities for shepherds.

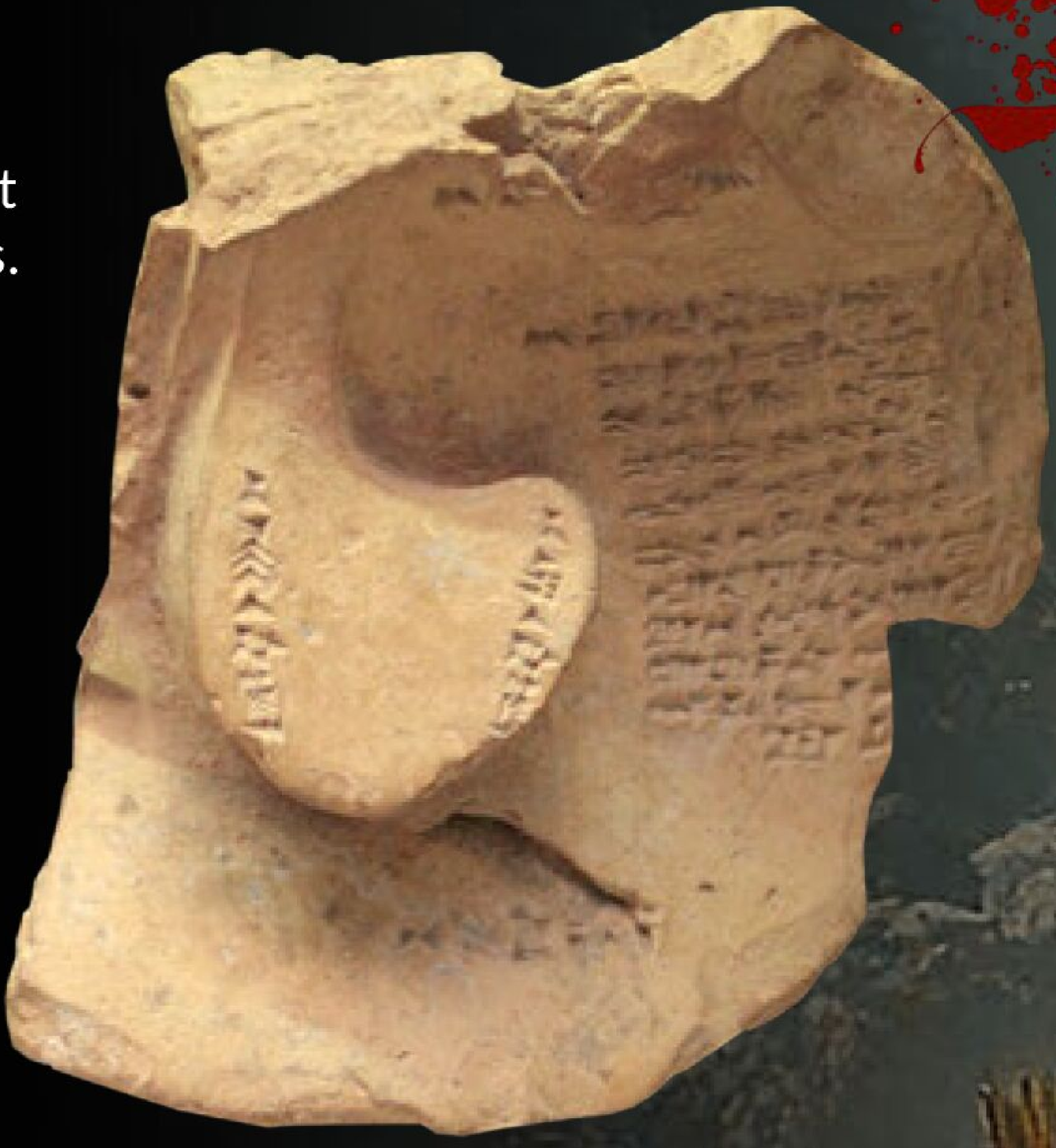
What killed it? Nature’s indifference—droughts, floods, salted earth. Empires bloated with greed, alienating vassals and inviting invaders. Yet Mesopotamia didn’t vanish—it dissolved into new forms, its DNA lingering in the cultures that followed.

Legacy: Casting Shadows Through Time

Mesopotamia’s ascent was an unfiltered, chaotic burst of firsts—cities, laws, literacy, intoxication. Its decline was a protracted unraveling, eroded by time and conquest. Its ruins—Ur’s ziggurat, Babylon’s reconstructed gate—stand as mute testaments to its appetites and its accomplishments. We inherited its calendars, its math, its primal myths like Gilgamesh, a tale of hubris and loss that still stings. It ended in ruins, but it was the cradle of civilization, casting a shadow that is long and timeless, forming the foundation for all that came after. ■

Mesopotamia's Bloody Oracle:

DIVINING FATE IN A SHEEP'S LIVER



In the sun-scorched plains of ancient Mesopotamia, the Sumerians didn't mess around with horoscopes or tarot cards—they went straight for the guts. Around 3000 BCE, these pioneers of civilization believed the liver was the body's command center, the pulsing core of soul, emotion, and divine will. Hearts were for poets; livers were for power. This conviction spawned hepatoscopy, a grisly ritual where priests dissected sheep livers to glimpse the future—a practice so visceral it makes modern fortune-telling look like a parlor trick. Hepatoscopy originated with the Sumerians, who viewed the liver as the body's nexus of emotion and divine communication. The practice proliferated across Mesopotamia, adopted by Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. By the reign of Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE), hepatoscopy was integral to statecraft, possibly influencing his legal reforms. Assyrian kings, notably Ashurbanipal (7th century BCE), institutionalized it in military campaigns, reflecting its enduring political significance.

The logic was raw and primal. The liver, engorged with blood and nestled deep in the body, seemed to hum with life's essence—especially after a few rounds of barley beer, a Sumerian staple. To them, it was a hotline to the gods, who scribbled their plans in its folds.

When a king faced war, famine, or a shaky trade deal in cities like Uruk or Ur, he summoned a baru—a liver-reading priest with a blade and a stomach for carnage. The baru would slaughter a sheep, rip out its steaming liver, and decode its secrets while the blood was still slick on his hands.

The liver's association with life force (*etemmu*) made it a divine conduit. Unlike later cultures that prioritized the heart, Mesopotamians believed the liver housed consciousness and emotion. Hepatoscopy thus offered a tangible means to decipher the gods' will, transforming chaos into order. In a region plagued by erratic floods and geopolitical instability, it provided elites with psychological reassurance and a veneer of control.

This wasn't casual butchery—it was a meticulous art. The baru scrutinized every vein, lobe, and discoloration like a surgeon turned mystic. A glossy surface might signal divine favor; a jagged scar could warn of betrayal. Clay tablets from Mari and Babylon catalog hundreds of omens—think "if the bile duct's twisted, the enemy's plotting" or "if the left lobe's pale, your vassal's a snake." Sumerians even crafted clay liver models, etched with cuneiform, as grim manuals for the trade. It was obsessive, blending reverence with a butcher's precision—a snapshot of a culture that saw order in chaos, even if it stank of death.

Ritual Practice: Anatomy of Divination

The ritual unfolded in stages:

1. SELECTION: A flawless sheep, symbolizing purity, was chosen.

2. SACRIFICE: The animal was slaughtered, its liver extracted while still warm.

3. EXAMINATION: The baru scrutinized the liver's lobes, vessels, and discolorations, cross-referencing anomalies with omen databases. For instance, a twisted bile duct might portend betrayal, while a pale left lobe signaled political unrest.

4. RESOLUTION: If omens were unfavorable, additional sacrifices ensued until favorable signs emerged.

Hepatoscopy went viral across Mesopotamia. So the Akkadians picked it up, Hammurabi might've consulted it before carving his law code in 1750 BCE, and the Assyrians turned it into a war-room staple—Ashurbanipal's generals likely read livers before skewering foes in the 7th century BCE. Archaeologists have unearthed troves of these artifacts, from Nineveh to Sippar, proof of its grip on a civilization that ruled through bronze and bravado. If the omens soured, they'd slit another throat until the gods relented—superstition with a body count.

For us, it's a macabre curiosity, but for them, it was existential. In a world of fickle rivers and relentless enemies, hepatoscopy offered control—or at least the illusion of it. The Sumerians birthed writing, law, and cities, yet clung to this bloody rite, a reminder that even geniuses lean on the absurd when the stakes are high. So next time you pour a drink, spare a thought for the baru, elbow-deep in entrails, chasing fate in a sheep's liver. ■

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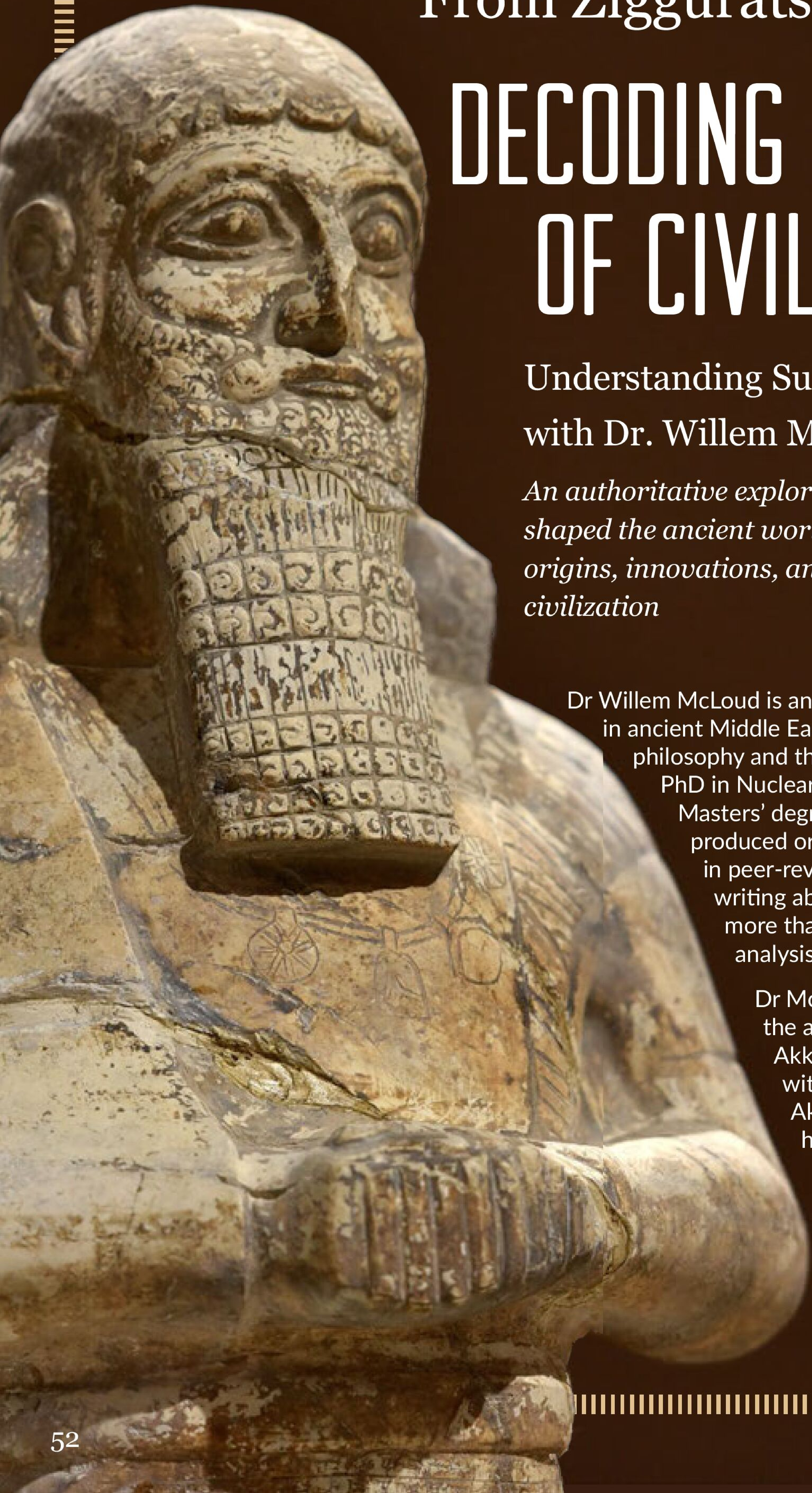

From Ziggurats to Empires:

DECODING THE DAWN OF CIVILIZATION

Understanding Sumer with Dr. Willem McLoud

An authoritative exploration of how the Sumerians shaped the ancient world — A deep dive into the origins, innovations, and collapse of the world's first civilization

Dr Willem McLoud is an independent scholar with a keen interest in ancient Middle Eastern and Mediterranean studies, Kantian philosophy and the philosophy of science. Willem holds a PhD in Nuclear Physics (Nuclear Fusion) as well as three Masters' degrees. He is an innovative thinker who has produced original work in various fields published in peer-review journals, and his research of and writing about the ancient world has included by more than three decades of groundbreaking analysis.

Dr McLoud's main areas of interest regarding the ancient Middle East are the Sumerian, Akkadian and early Egyptian civilizations, with a special focus on the Uruk and Akkadian Periods of Mesopotamian history and the Old Kingdom Period in Egyptian history. Willem had the privilege of participating for a few years in a Sumerian reading group led by the cuneiform specialist, Prof Fanie Vermaak. Additionally, he has a keen interest in the civilizations that formed in the eastern

Mediterranean Region during the early second millennium BC, and he has written and spoken frequently about the early Roman Era and the origins of Christianity captivating.

As part of his research and writing projects, he has led many a research tour to the Middle East as well as the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions, visiting countries such as Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Bahrain, Iran, Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria to name but a few. McLoud developed a new ancient Middle Eastern chronological model in which the Mesopotamian high chronology is correlated with the Egyptian low chronology, which was published in the Journal for Semitic Studies (2019/2).

This value of this model was dramatically confirmed shortly thereafter, by the newly published text of the recently discovered Epic of Gulkišar (Journal for Semitics 2020/1). Willem also developed a Sumerian Hypothesis to explain the many Mesopotamian influences in the primeval history in the Book of Genesis (Journal for Semitics 2020/2).

As his personal and professional history clearly illustrate, few scholars are more qualified to assess the reasons for both the rise and the eventual fall of the Sumerian civilization than Willem McLoud, who sat down with us to discuss this fascinating and ever-relevant topic.

Origins and Innovations

Q: The Sumerians are credited as the world's first known civilization. What factors do you think contributed to their early success?

Willem McLoud: The Sumerian civilization existed for about 3500 years, from 5500 BC to 2060 BC. It consisted of various distinct historical periods, namely the Ubaid Period (5500-3500 BC), Uruk Period (3500-2850 BC), Jemdet Nasr Period (2850-2750 BC), Early Dynastic Period (2750-2370 BC), Akkadian Period (2370-2190 BC) and the Ur III Period (2168-2060 BC). These dates are in accordance with my own chronological model, in which the Egyptian low chronology and the Mesopotamian high chronology are aligned.

The Sumerians settled in the southern marsh lands of Mesopotamia from about 5500 BC. They were an agricultural society who established themselves in the fertile estuary of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. They planted wheat, barley and dates and kept domesticated animals like goats, pigs, sheep, cattle, oxen and donkeys. The particular circumstances of the delta region, which allowed for large fields of crops and plantations to be set up, led to the development of irrigation, canal building and the discovery of the wheel. They built boats to navigate the canals and later on ships to traverse the Persian Gulf. Domesticated animals played a central role in food production, cultivation of the ground and the transportation of goods and people.

The most important factor, however, in their success was probably the production of surplus grain during the Uruk Period. The export of grain and other products led to the establishment of extended trade networks that eventually during the so-called Uruk Expansion (c. 3000-2850 BC) stretched far and wide into the upper Zagros and Taurus Mountains, across the Persian Gulf and

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even as far as Egypt. In exchange for grain, the Sumerians needed metals, stone, precious stones and timber that they had to import from the land of Aratta in the north (building materials), Oman in the Persian Gulf Region (copper) and even Afghanistan (lapis lazuli stone).

Q: The Sumerians developed one of the earliest writing systems, cuneiform. How did this innovation shape their society, and what are some of the most fascinating texts we've uncovered?

Willem McLoud: The Sumerian trade networks led to the need for correspondence, which at first existed of very simple pictographic symbols and the use of tokens placed in clay envelops as part of an early accounting system. At some point towards the end of the Uruk Period phonetic writing was discovered, with the symbols no longer used merely for their pictures but instead for the pronunciation of the items on the symbols. This led to a writing system based on sounds associated with the symbols.

At first phonetic writing was used to write names of cities and kings and compose lists like the famous occupations list. The earliest Sumerian ruler whose inscriptions have been found is Enmebaragesi, king of Kish (c. 2850 BC). His inscriptions were done in a very early style of writing in which straight lines were used instead of the typical nail type cuneiform that came into use later on. They might date as far back as the Jemdet Nasr Period that followed directly after the Uruk Period.

The earliest literary texts date from about 2500 BC. The great Sumerian epics were for the most part composed even later during the so-called Sumerian Renaissance of the Ur III Period (c. 2100 BC) from oral traditions.

The great Sumerian heroic epics are collectively called the Gesta Urukaeorum. They include the "Matter of Aratta," which tells of the exploits of the Sumerian heroes Enmerkar and Lugalbanda and focuses on the conflict between Sumer and Aratta. Other heroic epics recount the great deeds of Gilgamesh. The well-known Epic of Gilgamesh was composed still later on, during the early Old Babylonian Period.

Q: Apart from writing, what were some of the most groundbreaking inventions of the Sumerians that still impact our world today?

Willem McLoud: The mass production of grain, as well as bricks for the monumental works that characterized the final phases of the building of the city of Uruk (c. 3000-2850 BC) to some extent foreshadowed the industrial revolution so many millennia later. Uruk was by far the largest city in the world during that period, with buildings like the Ziggurat of An, the White Temple, the Inana Precinct and the colorful Cone Mosaic Temple. The development of extensive trade networks and phonetic writing led to the development of a complex society, with a social hierarchy that controlled, managed and facilitated the different aspects of tha society. The development of complex societies is the hallmark of civilization, which is why the Sumerians are credited with forming the earliest civilization.

The use of mathematics and the discovery of the sexagesimal number system based on 60 was perhaps the greatest achievement of the Sumerians, a system that to this day is used for measuring time (minutes and seconds) and angles (degrees), with the circle being divided into 360 degrees. And to this day astronomers carefully study the starry heavens, exactly like the Sumerians who first applied this number system to the celestial sky.

Society, Culture, and Beliefs

Q: What do we know about the daily life of an average Sumerian? How did social classes function in their society?

Willem McLoud: At least since the Uruk Period, Sumerian society was characterized by a great variety of specialized trades and crafts as can be seen from the occupations list. Among the professions were counted farmers, herders, metalworkers and other craftsmen like weavers, potters and construction workers, musicians, and boatmen, as well as many other jobs pertaining to the royal household and temple service. The French scholar Petr Charvát has proposed that groups similar to the Indian caste system existed and might even have originated in Sumer during the late Uruk or Jemdet Nasr Periods.

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the city of Uruk is divided into four parts, namely the large temple area of Inana, the area where people lived under the king's rule, the date groves and lastly, the clay pits, where the building bricks were produced. These four sectors of the city correspond exactly with the caste system, consisting of priests, the king together with his warriors, and the farmers and the workers, especially the builders and the smiths. Sumerians were also great entrepreneurs involved in private enterprise, especially during the Ur III Period, when the Alik Tilmun, an ancient merchant guild centered on the island of Dilmun (Bahrain), for example, deployed craftsmen on their many overseas operations.

Q: In Sumeria religion was deeply intertwined with life in their cities. How did their gods and myths influence governance and daily life?

Willem McLoud: The two pillars of Sumerian society were the palace and the temple. Already during the Uruk Period, the city of Uruk was ruled by great and powerful men and had magnificent temples. The great heroic period of Sumerian tradition, when the first House of Uruk ruled, most likely coincided with the Uruk Period. This dynasty included rulers like Meskiagkasher, Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and Dumuzi according to the Sumerian King List. Later rulers listed as part of this dynasty, however, ruled later on. The particular features associated with these rulers according to the Sumerian oral and later literary tradition are archaeologically attested to during the Uruk Period.

Later on, during the Early Dynastic Period, different Sumerian cities vied for control of the land. The prominent Sumerian cities had a temple where one of the Sumerian gods was worshipped as well as a palace where the king ruled. An early list of the most important city gods appears on the Bassetki statue of the deified Akkadian king, Naram-Sin (c. 2280 BC), mentioning Ishtar venerated in Eanna (Uruk), Enlil in Nippur, Dagan in Tuttul, Ninhursag in Kesh, Ea [Enki] in Eridu, Sin in Ur, Samas [Utu] in Sippur and Nergal in Kutha.

Sargon the Great of Akkad, who founded the Akkadian Empire, which interrupted the Sumerian rule of the land, had a daughter called Enheduanna (c. 2300 BC), a priestess and poetess, who compiled a collection of 42 temple hymns from all across Sumer and Akkad.

The gods were viewed as belonging to a different cosmic plain but were nonetheless involved in human affairs. The most important cosmic principle according to which Enlil, king of the gods since perhaps the Jemdet Nasr Period, ruled the cosmos was called the "me", the regulative order in the cosmos which became manifest in the norms of civilization. The roles of the different gods and their myths (closely associated with different aspects of nature) upheld the order in the cosmos.

The entire Sumerian civilization was based on this idea of order in the cosmos. The earliest know law code, introduced by Ur-Nammu, founder of the Ur III dynasty, was designed to enforce this cosmic order. The Sumerians moreover believed in the existence of a wide spectrum of spirit beings, some of whom served as attendant goddesses who could intervene on behalf of humans with the gods.

Q: Were the Sumerians peaceful traders or aggressive warriors? What do historical records say about their military and diplomatic strategies?

Willem McLoud: The Sumerians were for the most part a peace-loving people, as the earliest Sumerian rulers were priestly rulers, called “en” in the Sumerian language. The land was, however, shared with Semites who lived to the north of Sumer, where Kish was the seat of a Semitic dynasty since early times.

According to Sumerian tradition, the first person ever to have become king was Etana, a ruler of Kish. In later centuries the title “King of Kish” became much sought after. The Sumerian term for king was “lugal”, which literally means “big man”, with the first kings having been warrior-leaders, most likely Semites. Even though the Sumerian King List calls all the early Sumerian rulers “kings”, this was simply in retrospect in accordance with later conventions.

The archetypal Sumerian ruler was a wise man skilled in diplomacy. In contrast, the archetypal Semite ruler (who ruled in Kish and later Akkad) was a warrior-king who aspired towards conquest and political control. The earliest evidence for large armies appears during the Sumerian Expansion at the peak of the Uruk Period (3000-2850 BC). This period saw fortified structures on the plains as well as the highlands from where garrisons could control large areas as well as depictions of war in art as well as deposits of weapons, found in Uruk and surrounding areas towards the end of the period.

The two most significant periods in Sumerian history are the Uruk Period, characterized by the massive building projects in Uruk towards the end of that period, and the Sumerian Renaissance of the Ur III Period, when the seat of Sumerian power was located at Ur and these kings ruled a massive empire built in the image of the Empire of the Akkadians which dated some years prior. The many documents dating from the Ur III Period do provide some insight into their military and diplomatic strategies. As during the earlier Akkadian Period, the land was in constant danger from Hurrians and other peoples who resided in the mountainous north. Wars of conquest were fought at the frontiers of the empire, most certainly influenced by the Akkadian example.

An important diplomatic strategy used by the Ur III kings to ensure peace was to marry the daughters of prominent regional rulers and give their daughters to such rulers. As Sumer lacked many necessary resources, which had to be imported, a large part of their military and diplomatic strategy consisted of ensuring that the trade routes were secure.

Q: It seems that Sumerian cities like Ur, Uruk, and Eridu were among the first urban centers. What made these cities so advanced for their time?

Willem McLoud: The city of Eridu grew around the oldest sanctuary that existed in ancient Sumer, where the god Enki was worshipped. The city of Uruk, built during the Uruk Period, became the largest city in the world towards the end of that period, stretching over 250 hectares with a population of more than 50,000 people.

As for the city of Ur, it was a prominent city during the time of the first and third dynasties that ruled the city. What made Ur significant was its location deep in the Euphrates Estuary, with its harbor giving easy access to the Persian Gulf. Both Uruk and Ur served as capital cities for great and mighty dynasties who ruled over the ends of the known world.

Great Semiramis, Queen of Assyria - Cesare Saccaggi.

Decline and Mysterious Fall

Q: The Akkadian Empire, led by Sargon the Great, eventually conquered Sumer. What factors allowed this to happen? Was it purely a matter of military conquest or was it something deeper?

Willem McLoud: The Akkadian conquest has to be understood within the context of a long Semitic heritage of warrior-kings who ruled in Kish. An early king of Kish, namely Enmebaragesi, seems to have been the one who brought an end to Urukite power at the end of the Uruk Period, even though Gilgamesh, a scion of the first Uruk dynasty, returned to the throne some years later (at least according to tradition). Kish does feature strongly in inscriptions from the Jemdet Nasr Period and according to the Sumerian King List Enmebaragesi "consolidated the lands".

The Akkadians stemmed from Kish, where Sargon's father was apparently dethroned by a usurper, namely Ur-Zababa. Sargon set out to regain the throne in accordance with the meaning of his name, "true/rightful king". After this victory, Sargon continued with the conquest of Sumer and later on many other areas all across the ancient Middle Eastern world. He established the seat of his empire, the world's very first empire, in the city of Akkad.

Sargon renamed the land "Sumer and Akkad" (it was previously called "Sumer and Uri"). His daughter Enheduanna established a new religious system that went a long way towards integrating Sumerian and Akkadian religion, cults and culture. In later times, the Ur III rulers followed many of the conventions established by the Akkadians.

Q: Environmental factors, such as climate change and soil salinization, have been proposed as causes for Sumer's decline. How significant do you think these were compared to political struggles?

Willem McLoud: It is not easy to determine what led to the fall of the Sumerian civilization and all these factors might have played a role. The Sumerians did in fact develop techniques and practices to control soil salinization, like planting saline-tolerant barley. What is, however, important to note is that the Ur III rulers established an integrated world in which it became much easier for other rulers to lead military campaigns and conquer land. In my view the main reason for the collapse of the Ur III Empire was simply that too many role players became strong enough to challenge Sumerian power, especially the Elamites to the east who sacked Ur, but also the Amorites who settled all across southern Mesopotamia where they eventually established the Babylonian civilization.

Q: The Sumerian language eventually disappeared, replaced by Akkadian. What does this linguistic shift tell us about the assimilation of Sumerian culture into later civilizations?

Willem McLoud: The new Amorite rulers of southern Mesopotamia who came after the Sumerians were Semites, which explains why the Akkadian language became the new lingua franca. The Akkadian language had come into widespread use during the Akkadian Empire a few centuries earlier and thereafter scribes continued to use it together with Sumerian.

After the fall of the Sumerian civilization, the Sumerian language was no longer spoken as a common language, even though it continued as a sacred, ceremonial and literary language used by scribes (much like Latin in medieval Europe). Even though the Babylonians took over much from Sumerian culture and religion, scribes now wrote primarily in the Akkadian language. The Epic of Gilgamesh was, for example, composed in Akkadian during this period.

Legacy and Influence

Q: How much of Sumerian culture lived on in later Mesopotamian civilizations like Babylon and Assyria?

Willem McLoud: The influence of Sumerian culture on later Mesopotamian civilizations was extensive and included aspects from all spheres of life. The reason for this follows from the fact that the Sumerian culture became integrated with Akkadian culture during the Akkadian Period, which resulted in its continued existence in the aftermath of the fall of the Ur III dynasty as the newcomers were also Semites. This explains why the fall of the Sumerian civilization did not result in a "barbaric" age but instead led to the formation of other great civilizations, namely the Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations.

The worldview of the Sumerians survived and spread all across the ancient Middle East, as did the worship of their gods and the practice of their cults like the Dumuzi cult, especially with the adaptations that Enheduanna made to the cult. State-sponsored scribal academies founded by Sulgi, himself a scribe and the second ruler of the Ur III dynasty, outlived the Sumerian civilization, with these schools having played a major role in spreading learning and knowledge throughout the Middle East. The Sumerian script was used for other languages and Sumerian literature had a major influence on later generations. Other Sumerian inventions also became part and parcel of everyday life.

Q: Some fringe theories suggest Sumerians had extraterrestrial connections or possessed now lost advanced knowledge. Do you think any of these claims hold weight, or are they just myths?

Willem McLoud: The Sumerians believed that the first House of Uruk was descended from the great gods, in particular the sun god. Gilgamesh was said to have been born when a lillû daemon impregnated his mother: "Divine Gilgamesh, his father (was) a lillû daemon, a high priest of Kulab." This apparently happened by way of the hieros gamos, the sacred marriage ritual practiced by the Sumerians. This idea of gods impregnating human maidens to produce divine or semi-divine figures also appears much later in the biblical tradition about the so-called Nephilim.

Some contemporary authors have interpreted this tradition about the gods having been born on earth in terms of extraterrestrials having come from another planet to earth. They also point to iconographical depictions of humanoids with serpent or lizard features. These features can, however, also be explained in terms of shamanistic traditions.

Q: If the Sumerian civilization had not fallen when it did, how might history have been different?

Willem McLoud: History might not have been very different after all. The synthesis between the Sumerian and Akkadian cultures produced a new integrated culture with a remarkable longevity. What would have been different is that the pantheon of gods would most likely have stayed the same. Instead, the Babylonians elevated Marduk, son of Enki, to become the new king of the gods in the place of Enlil. Marduk was quite a different kind of king than Enlil.

Q: What's the most underrated or overlooked aspect of Sumerian history that you think people should know about?

Willem McLoud: In my view the most overlooked aspect of Sumerian culture is the extent to which it had been influenced by the Semites who lived among the Sumerians from the earliest times. The Sumerians got some of their gods as well as their idea of kingship from the Semites.

An, the Sumerian father of the gods, was most likely none other than El, the Semitic father of the gods. Scholars have proposed that Enlil was actually a form of El, with the prefix “en”, meaning “lord”, simply added to the name. It seems that the name Enlil was originally Illil, basically a duplication of ‘l (El). In the final phase of the Sumerian civilization their leaders and society incorporated many Akkadian practices.

Final Thoughts

Q: What can modern societies learn from the rise and fall of Sumer? Are there any cautionary lessons that still apply today?

Willem McLoud: Even though the Ur III rulers made much of their presumed descent from the most celebrated of Sumerian rulers, namely Gilgamesh, in practice they modeled their empire on that of the Akkadians. Whereas the earlier Sumerians rulers were wise priestly rulers, these deified kings instead became warrior-leaders in the Akkadian image of a great ruler.

They were, however, not as successful as the Akkadian emperors who left a great legacy, with Sargon and Naram-Sin having been regarded as archetypal and ideal kings by later generations of Mesopotamian rulers. Among the Ur III kings, only Shulgi was fondly remembered by later generations as a wise and enlightened king.

The lesson is perhaps that civilizations should not forget those things that once made them great. Leaders should be careful not to become too confident and overextend themselves. As a wise man once said: “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall”. And the power of the written word should never be underestimated. ■

The Egyptian

The Egyptian Empire stands as one of history's most impressive spectacles—a civilization that thrived for millennia along the life-giving ribbon of the Nile, only to crumble under the weight of its own grandeur and the relentless march of time. Egypt offers a gripping narrative: a saga of divine kings, architectural marvels, and a society so intertwined with its environment that its rise and fall seem almost predestined. From its humble beginnings around 3100 BCE to its final gasps under Roman rule in 30 BCE, the Egyptian Empire's story is one of ambition, resilience, and inevitable decline.

The Rise Begins

Imagine a world where the desert stretches endlessly, broken only by a river that snakes through the sand like a lifeline. Around 3100 BCE, this was Egypt—a harsh land tamed by the Nile's annual floods, which deposited rich silt perfect for farming. It was here, in this fertile cradle, that the Egyptian Empire took root.

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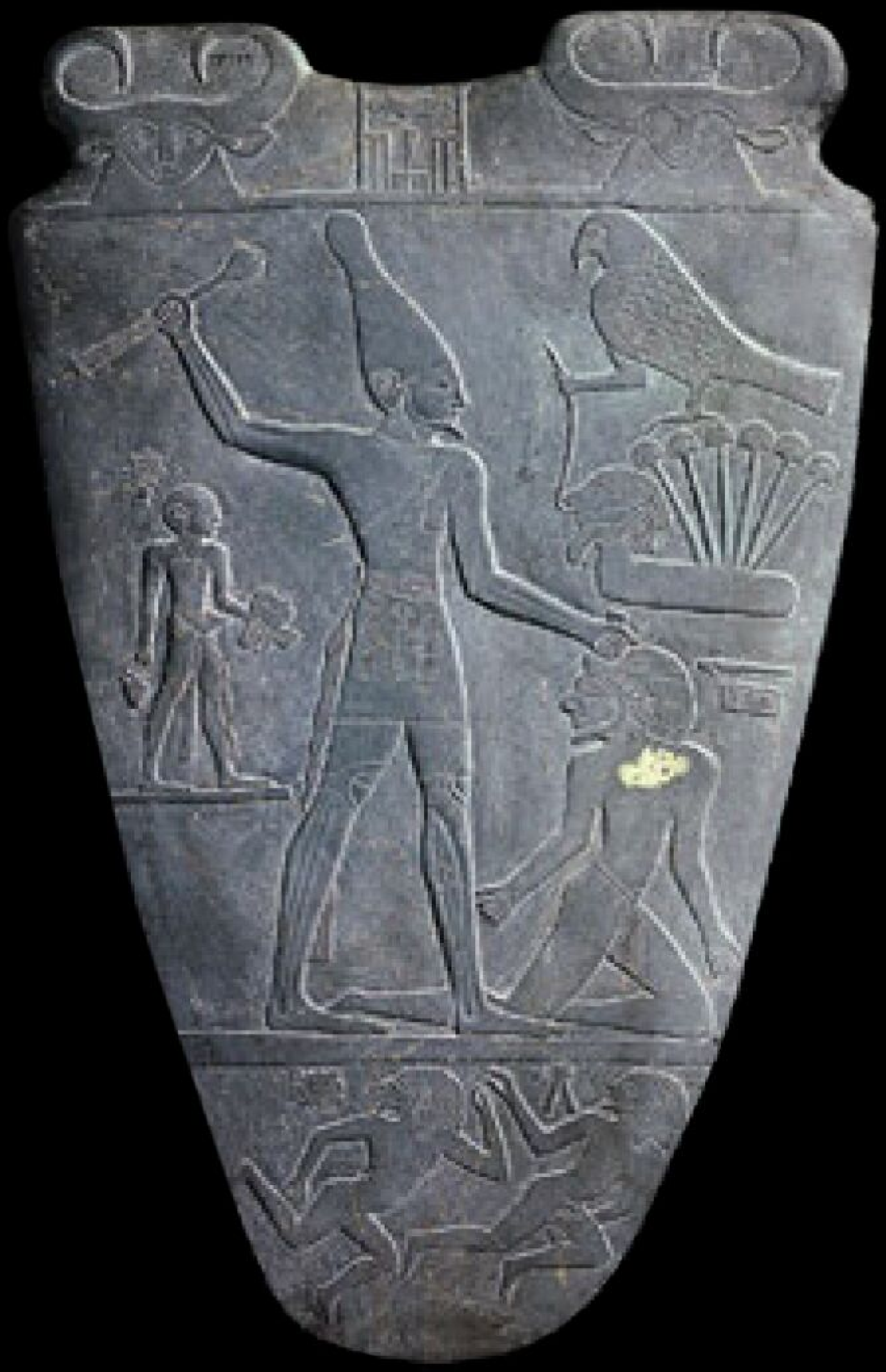
Empire

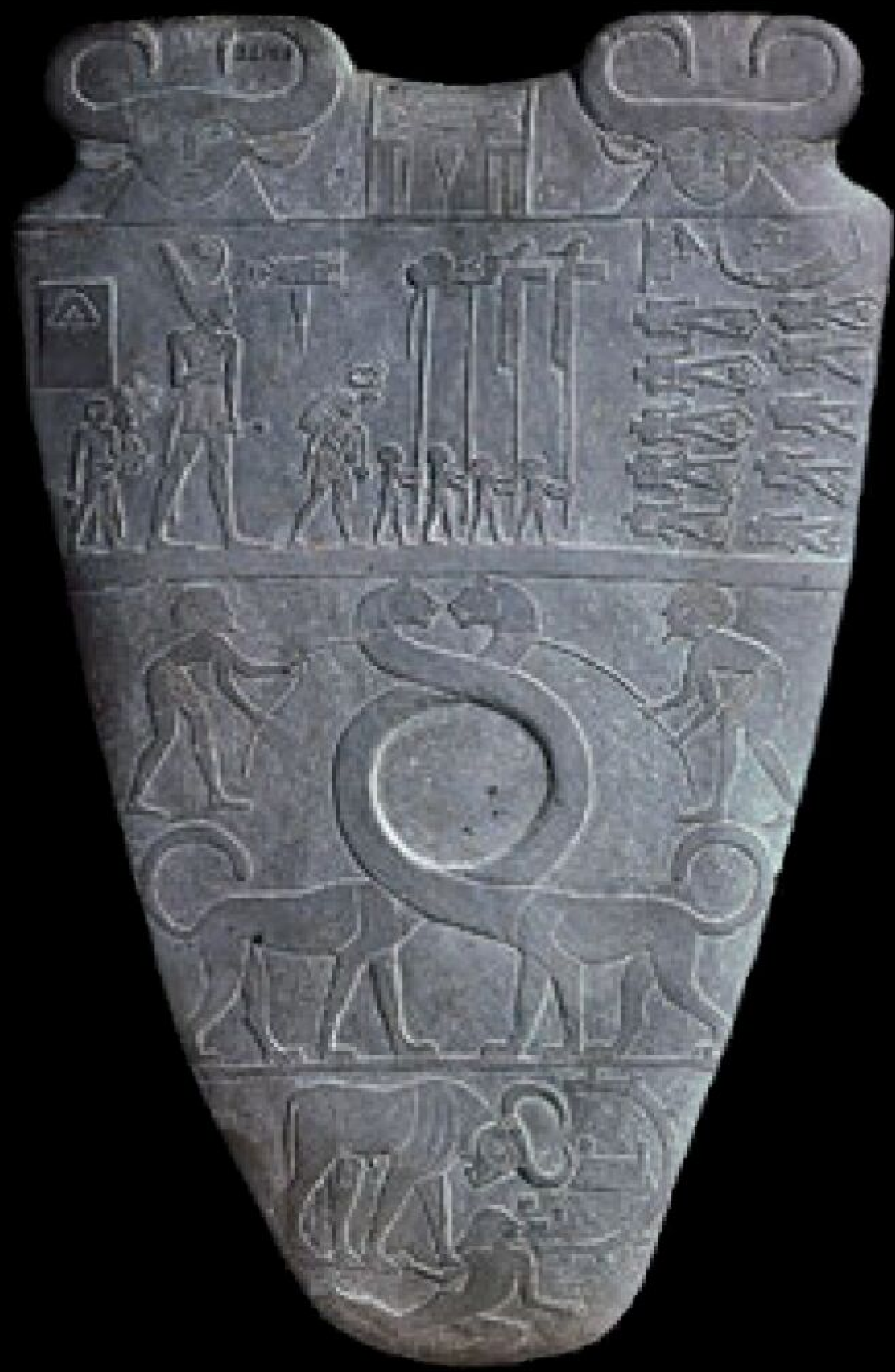
A Tale of Gods, Power, and Sand

BY IOANNIS SYRIGOS



The Old Kingdom (circa 2686–2181 BCE) was Egypt's golden age of pyramid-building, a testament to its centralized power and religious fervour. Pharaohs, seen as living gods, commanded vast resources to construct monuments like the Step Pyramid of Djoser and, later, the Great Pyramid of Giza. These were statements of divine authority, engineered with such precision that modern scholars still marvel at their construction. The Egyptians believed their rulers ensured cosmic order, or ma'at, and the pyramids were a physical bridge between earth and the afterlife.

What made Egypt's rise so remarkable was its stability. While other ancient societies crumbled under war or famine, Egypt's predictable floods and isolated geography—flanked by deserts and seas—shielded it from chaos. A sophisticated bureaucracy managed grain surpluses, taxes, and labour, while hieroglyphics preserved knowledge and culture. By 2500 BCE, Egypt was a superpower, trading gold, papyrus, and incense with neighbours like Nubia and Punt, its influence stretching across the ancient world.



The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under King Narmer (often identified with Menes) marked the birth of the Old Kingdom, a period of extraordinary innovation and power. Narmer's Palette, a ceremonial artifact, depicts him wearing the crowns of both regions, a symbol of the unity that would define Egypt's early strength.

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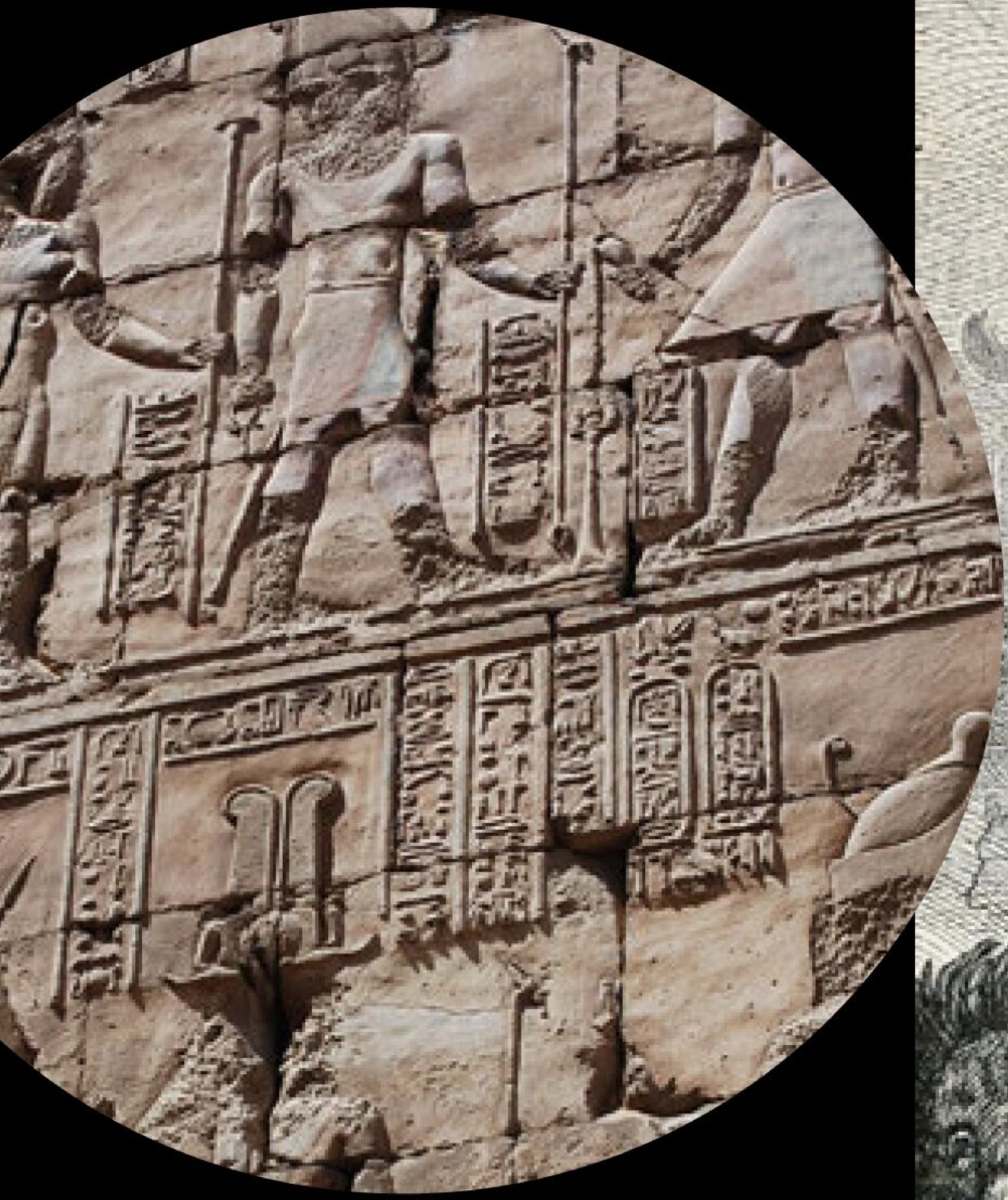
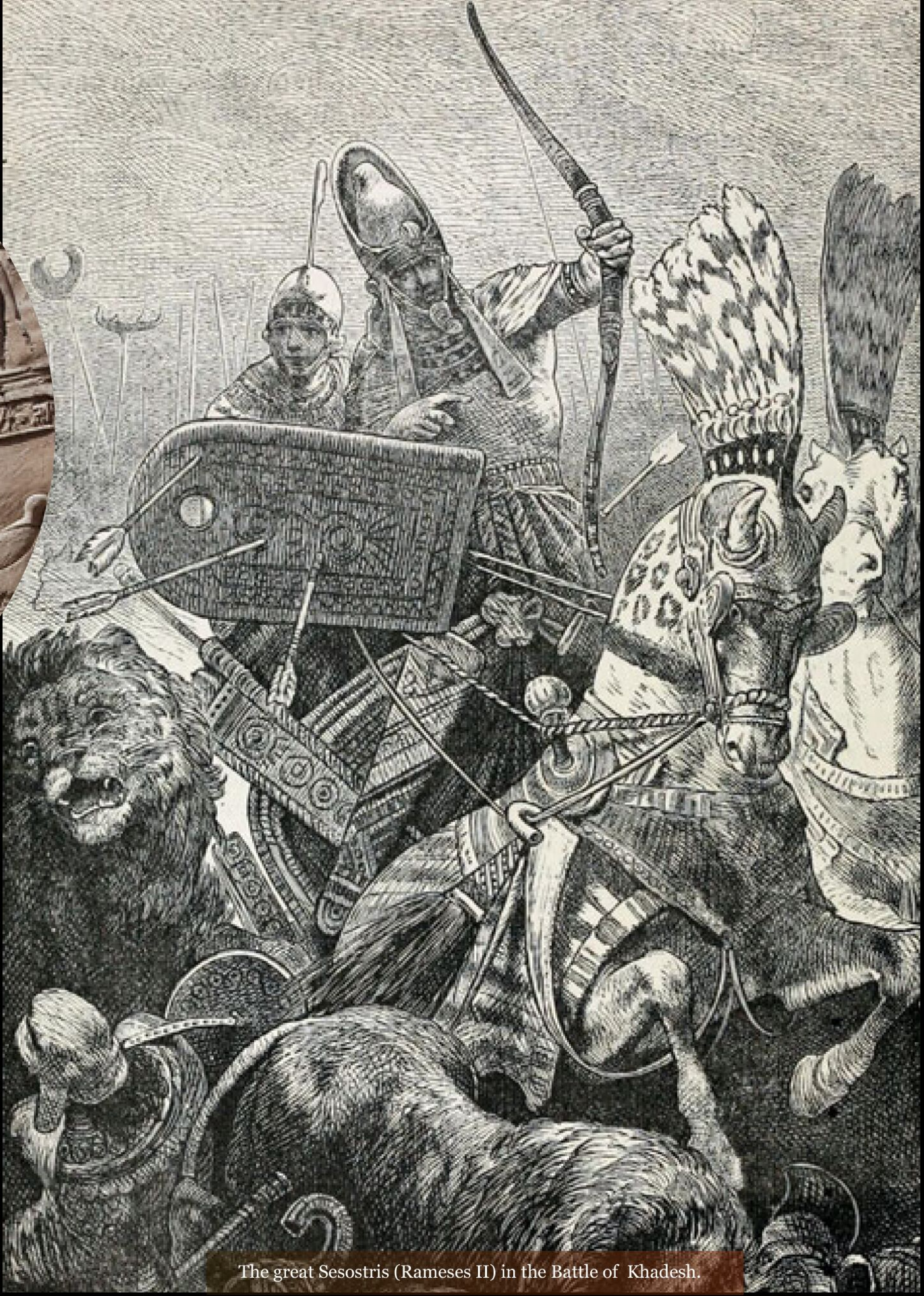
On the top left, the Tablet of The King Narmer and above relief of Ramses fighting the Hyksos.



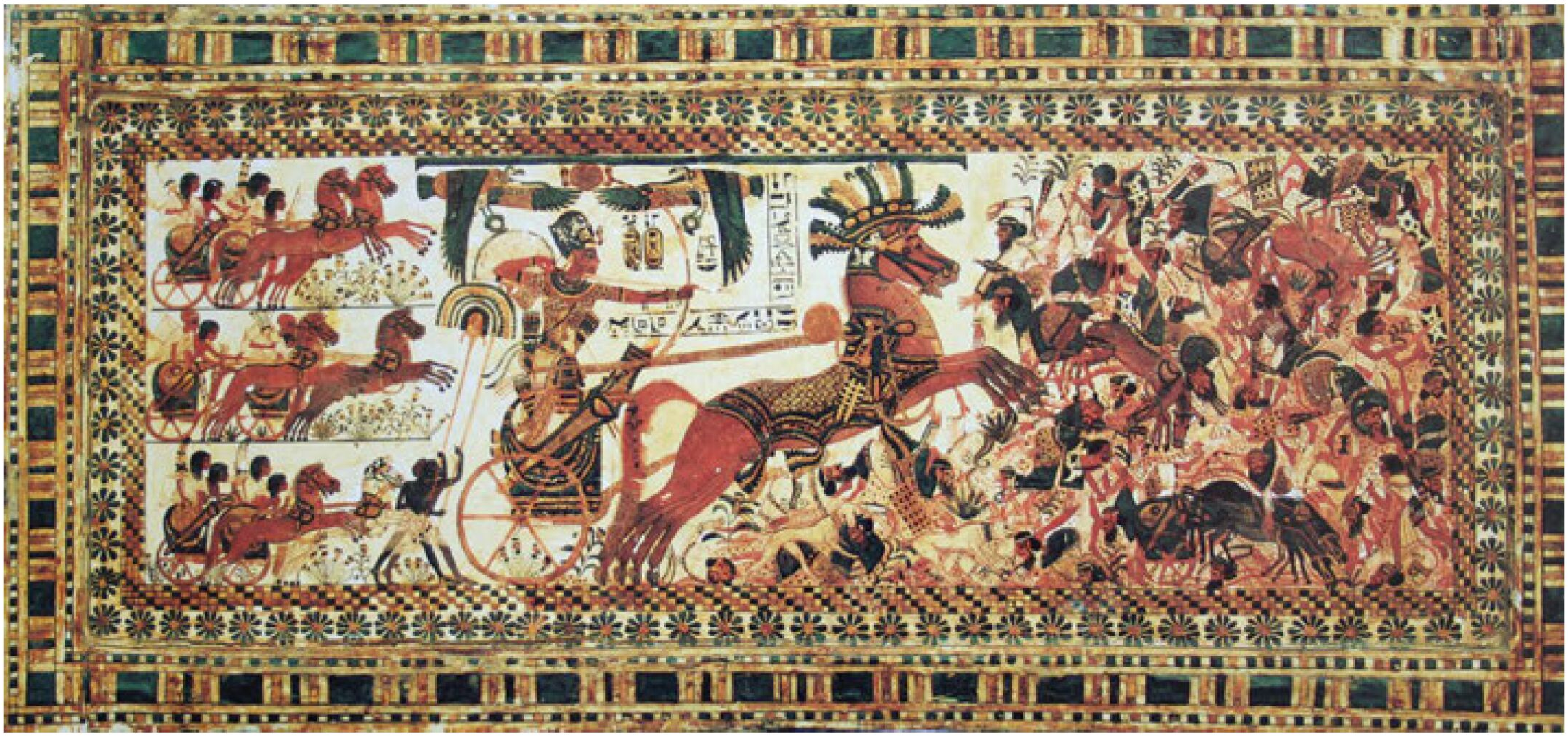


The great Sesostris (Rameses II) in the Battle of Khadesh.

The Middle Kingdom: Resilience and Expansion

But no empire escapes turbulence forever. Around 2181 BCE, drought and political infighting fractured the Old Kingdom, ushering in the First Intermediate Period—a century of disarray. Local nomarchs (governors) seized power, and the once-mighty pharaohs faded. Yet Egypt's story didn't end here. The Middle Kingdom (circa 2055–1650 BCE) emerged when Mentuhotep II reunified the land, proving Egypt's knack for rebirth.

This era wasn't about ostentatious pyramids but practical power. Pharaohs like Senusret III fortified Egypt's borders, pushing south into Nubia and securing trade routes. The Middle Kingdom saw a cultural renaissance, too—literature like The Tale of Sinuhe painted vivid pictures of Egyptian life, while art grew more expressive. The Nile remained the empire's heartbeat, but now Egypt flexed its muscles abroad, its armies and merchants extending its reach.



The Middle Kingdom's strength lay in its adaptability. Pharaohs decentralized some authority, empowering local leaders while maintaining control through loyalty and religion. Yet cracks appeared.

Around 1650 BCE, the Hyksos—mysterious Semitic invaders from the Levant—swept in with chariots and bronze weapons, technologies Egypt hadn't yet mastered. The Second Intermediate Period began, a humiliating chapter where foreign kings ruled the north while native dynasties clung to the south.

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The New Kingdom: Egypt's Imperial Zenith

If the Hyksos were Egypt's wake-up call, the New Kingdom (circa 1550–1070 BCE) was its roaring response. Ahmose I expelled the invaders, launching an era of

On the top, The Pharaoh Tutankhamun destroying his enemies. Above, the Hittite warriors from Yazilikaya.

The Thee Studio/adobe stock

unprecedented glory. This was Egypt as an empire in the truest sense—aggressive, cosmopolitan, and dazzlingly rich. Pharaohs like Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, and Ramses II turned Egypt into a Mediterranean juggernaut.

Hatshepsut, one of history's most successful female rulers, redefined power through peace. On her expedition to Punt she brought back myrrh trees and exotic goods, immortalized in reliefs at her mortuary temple.

Her stepson, Thutmose III, took a different tack—war. Dubbed the "Napoleon of Egypt," he led 17 campaigns, conquering Syria and Palestine, and filling Egypt's coffers with tribute. The Battle of Megiddo (circa 1457 BCE) showcased his brilliance, cementing Egypt's dominance.

Then came Ramses II, the swaggering colossus of the 13th century BCE. His 66-year reign saw the construction of Abu Simbel and the Ramesseum, monuments to his ego as much as his empire. The Battle of Kadesh (1274 BCE) against the Hittites ended in a stalemate but birthed the world's first recorded peace treaty—a diplomatic coup. Egypt's wealth glittered: gold from Nubia,

A group of Egyptian soldiers and Nubian mercenaries holding axes and branches of olives.
From the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, 15th century BCE. Neues Museum, Berlin.

cedar from Lebanon, and a capital, Thebes, that awed visitors with its temples and palaces.

Religion evolved, too. Akhenaten's brief, radical experiment with monotheism—worshipping only the sun disk, Aten—shook the priesthood, but his son Tutankhamun restored tradition. The New Kingdom's tombs, like Tut's, hid treasures that still captivate us, a glimpse into a society obsessed with eternity.

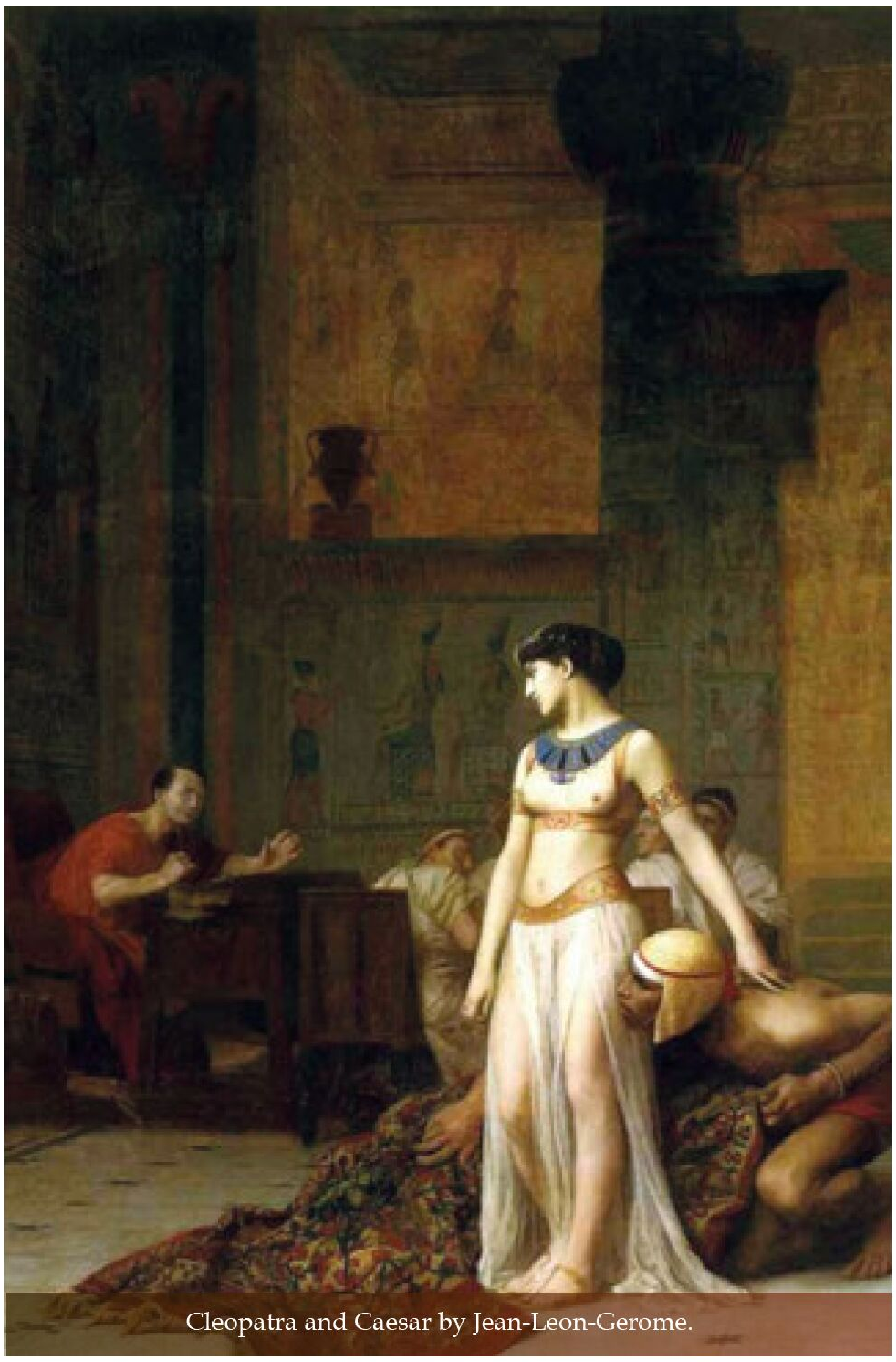
The Slow Fade: Decline Sets In

Even at its peak, Egypt's decline loomed just over the horizon. The New Kingdom's vast empire strained its resources. Maintaining garrisons in distant lands drained the treasury, while corruption crept into the bureaucracy. The Sea Peoples—enigmatic raiders from the Mediterranean—struck around 1200 BCE, weakening Egypt and its neighbours. Ramses III repelled them, but the effort left Egypt exhausted.

The Third Intermediate Period (circa 1070–664 BCE) saw Egypt fragment again. Libyan mercenaries settled in the Delta, forming their own dynasties, while Theban priests ruled the south. Foreign powers smelled blood. Nubians conquered Egypt in the 8th century BCE, founding the 25th Dynasty, but their rule was short-lived. Assyria, a brutal Mesopotamian empire, sacked Thebes in 663 BCE, leaving Egypt vulnerable.

The Late Period (664–332 BCE) offered a final flicker of independence. Pharaohs like Psamtik I, backed by Greek mercenaries, briefly revived Egypt's fortunes. Saqqara's necropolis and trade with Greece hinted at a comeback. But the world had changed. Persia invaded in 525 BCE, turning Egypt into a satrapy. Native revolts flared, but Egypt's days as a sovereign power were numbered.

By Creative mind/ AdobeStock



Cleopatra and Caesar by Jean-Leon-Gerome.

The Fall: Alexander and Cleopatra

In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great swept in, welcomed as a liberator from Persian rule. He founded Alexandria, a city that would outshine Egypt's past as a Hellenistic beacon. After his death, his general Ptolemy took over, launching the Ptolemaic Dynasty. These Greek rulers adopted pharaonic traditions—Cleopatra VII, the last of them, even spoke Egyptian—but they were foreigners at heart.

Cleopatra's reign (51–30 BCE) was Egypt's swan song. Her alliances with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony aimed to restore Egypt's glory, but Rome's rise was unstoppable. After the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, Octavian (later Augustus) pursued her to Alexandria. Facing capture, Cleopatra took her own life—legend says by asp bite—ending 3,000 years of pharaonic rule. Egypt then became a Roman province, its grain feeding the empire, its mystique reduced to a tourist attraction for toga-clad senators.

A Legacy in the Sand

The Egyptian Empire's rise was a triumph of human ingenuity, its fall a lesson in impermanence. It thrived because of the Nile, its pharaohs, and a culture that married the practical with the divine. It fell to internal rot, foreign blades, and the shifting tides of history. Today, its pyramids, temples, and tales endure—echoes of a civilization that once held the world in awe. For those who dig into ancient history, Egypt's story is a thrilling reminder: even the mightiest empires are but chapters in time's endless book. ■

PBMasterDesign/ AdobeStock

Espionage in

From Old

Espionage – the covert gathering of intelligence – was a critical element of statecraft and warfare in ancient Egypt. From the earliest dynasties, Egyptian rulers relied on information networks to secure their thrones and gain advantages over rivals. Hieroglyphic records and later papyri attest that pharaohs employed “court spies” and agents to ferret out internal dissent and scout foreign lands for potential threats or opportunities. As Egypt expanded its power, knowing an enemy’s plans or a vassal’s loyalties often meant the difference between victory and defeat. This discussion traces the role of espionage from the Old Kingdom (c. 2686 BCE) through the reign of Cleopatra VII (d. 30 BCE), highlighting how intelligence gathering shaped major military campaigns. Key examples – from a pharaoh’s scouts guiding surprise attacks to a queen’s network of informants spanning the Mediterranean – illustrate the methods and impact of espionage in pharaonic and Ptolemaic Egypt. Scholarly findings and archaeological evidence provide context for these clandestine operations.

Ancient Egypt

Kingdom Spies to Ptolemaic Informants

BY MASSIMO BONASORTE

Early Intelligence and Security

Old and Middle Kingdom Foundations:
In pharaonic Egypt, maintaining state security spurred some of the world's first organized intelligence efforts. As early as the Old Kingdom, officials were charged with "sniff[ing] out trouble and spy[ing] out the land" on behalf of the crown. By patrolling frontiers and gathering information on neighboring tribes, these agents helped Pharaoh anticipate rebellion or invasion. The autobiography of Harkhuf, a 6th Dynasty expedition leader, hints at such duties – he boasted of detecting unrest in Nubia and taking a hidden route to outmaneuver hostile chiefs. By the Middle Kingdom (c. 2050–1710 BCE), the pharaoh's "eyes and ears" extended across Egypt: surveillance of courtiers and provincial governors aimed to prevent plots, while messengers and merchants doubled as informants on foreign affairs. Literature of the era, such as *The Tale of Sinuhe*, reflects a milieu of palace intrigue and assassination fears, suggesting that intelligence about court conspiracies could be a matter of life or death. In essence, Egyptian rulers early on recognized that knowledge was power – a lesson that endured through the ages.

Second Intermediate Period Intrigues:
When centralized authority faltered around 1700–1550 BCE, espionage gained new urgency. Competing dynasties in Thebes (Upper Egypt) and the Hyksos-ruled Delta (Lower Egypt) spied on each other to plan their next moves. A dramatic example comes from Pharaoh Kamose (c. 1540 BCE) during the war to expel the Hyksos. Kamose's records describe how his forces intercepted a secret message from the Hyksos king

Apophis to the ruler of Kush (Nubia) – a letter imploring Nubian forces to attack Kamose's southern flank. This intelligence coup revealed an enemy alliance and justified Kamose's preemptive strike northward. The intercepted letter, recorded on the Carnarvon Tablet, even quotes Apophis urging Kushite aid: "Come north… and we will divide the land between us," exposing the Hyksos king's scheme. Armed with this knowledge, Kamose was able to isolate his foes and prevent a two-front war. Such incidents underscore that espionage in ancient Egypt was not limited to shadowy individual spies; it also involved diplomatic interception and communications intelligence, foreshadowing techniques of later eras.

Espionage in Egyptian Military Campaigns

The New Kingdom (c. 1550–1070 BCE) marked the zenith of Egyptian military power – and with it, a flowering of military espionage. Pharaohs of this era campaigned in Syria, Nubia, and beyond, often relying on scouts and informants to navigate foreign terrain and outwit enemy coalitions. One of the earliest and most famous battles with an intelligence twist is the Battle of Megiddo (c. 1457 BCE) under Thutmose III. Facing a large Canaanite confederation led by the king of Kadesh, Thutmose boldly chose to march his army through a narrow mountain pass to surprise the rebels – a risky move made possible by careful reconnaissance. According to Thutmose's Annals, the pharaoh's advisors had considered easier routes, but reports from his spies indicated the enemy was complacent and divided, not guarding the difficult Aruna pass. Thutmose seized on this intelligence of "disunity of command" among the Canaanite princes and launched a sudden strike. The result was a rout: the unexpected appearance of Egyptian forces caused the Canaanite army to panic and flee into Megiddo.

Ramses fight the Hyksos.

PhotoGranary / AdobeStock

While the Egyptians paused to loot the enemy camp – an error that turned a potential instant victory into a lengthy siege – Thutmose's initial success owed much to accurate intelligence and surprise. In later campaigns, he continued to use rapid mobility and likely local informants to keep enemy cities off-balance. Thutmose III's campaigns demonstrate how Egyptian generals integrated espionage and scouting into strategic planning as they built an empire.

New Kingdom: Agents and Ambushes at Kadesh

Perhaps the most vivid account of espionage in Egyptian history comes from the Battle of Kadesh (1274 BCE), where Pharaoh Ramesses II fought the Hittites. This clash produced detailed Egyptian records – including the Bulletin and the Poem of Pentaur – that highlight intelligence successes and failures. As Ramesses advanced into Syria, he was met by two apparent deserters from the Hittite side who claimed the enemy king's army was far off, near Aleppo. Trusting this misinformation, Ramesses hurried forward with minimal precautions. In truth, the "deserters" were Hittite double agents sent by King Muwatalli to lull the Egyptians into a trap. The ruse nearly worked: Ramesses marched right past the main Hittite force hiding behind Kadesh. The situation was salvaged only when Egyptian scouts captured

two other Hittite spies lurking near the camp. Under interrogation – the famous “beating of the spies” depicted on temple reliefs – these captives revealed the Hittite army was actually very close and poised to attack. With this critical warning, Ramesses hastily arrayed his troops just before Muwatalli’s chariots struck. Though the Egyptians were initially caught off-guard (Ramesses himself was nearly encircled in the melee), the pharaoh’s personal valor and reinforcements turned the tide. Kadesh ended in stalemate, but the episode is instructive: it shows both enemy espionage (disinformation) and Egyptian counter-intelligence (scout patrols and interrogations) in action. The vivid scene of the captured Hittite agents being beaten for information – proudly carved on multiple temple walls – attests to the enduring lesson Ramesses drew from Kadesh: never march blind in enemy territory.

After this close call, Egyptian armies in later campaigns took scouting more seriously, aware that deception could lurk behind any defector’s tale.

Intelligence and the Defeat of the Sea Peoples

In the late New Kingdom, Egyptian rulers faced entirely new foes from afar – the enigmatic Sea Peoples – and again, intelligence proved decisive. During Ramesses III's reign (c. 1180s BCE), waves of these sea-borne invaders threatened Egypt after ravaging other Eastern Mediterranean kingdoms. Ramesses III's inscriptions at Medinet Habu describe how he carefully prepared for the onslaught: Egyptian forces were stationed at strategic points, and the mouth of the Nile was fortified well in advance. This implies that the Egyptians had forewarning of the Sea Peoples' approach, likely from reports filtering in through diplomatic channels. (Indeed, letters from contemporaries like the king of Ugarit describe enemy ships appearing off their coasts, news that may have reached Egypt.) Armed with this intelligence, Ramesses III set an elaborate trap. He enticed the Sea Peoples' fleet into the Nile Delta, where hidden Egyptian warships and lines of archers lay in ambush. As the enemy sailed into the trap, Egyptian archers rained arrows from the shores, pinning them in place, while Ramesses' ships surged out to cut off any escape. The Medinet Habu texts boast that the Sea Peoples "entered stealthily into the harbor-mouth [only to] fall into [the net]" that Ramesses had laid. The ensuing Battle of the Delta (c. 1175 BCE) was a complete Egyptian victory – enemy vessels were overturned or captured en masse. This triumph was not just due to brute force; it was orchestrated by anticipating the enemy's strategy and channeling them into a pre-arranged kill-zone. In essence, Ramesses III acted on good intelligence (whether from spies, scouts, or allied correspondence) and employed counter-deception to save Egypt from invasion.

queen / adobestock

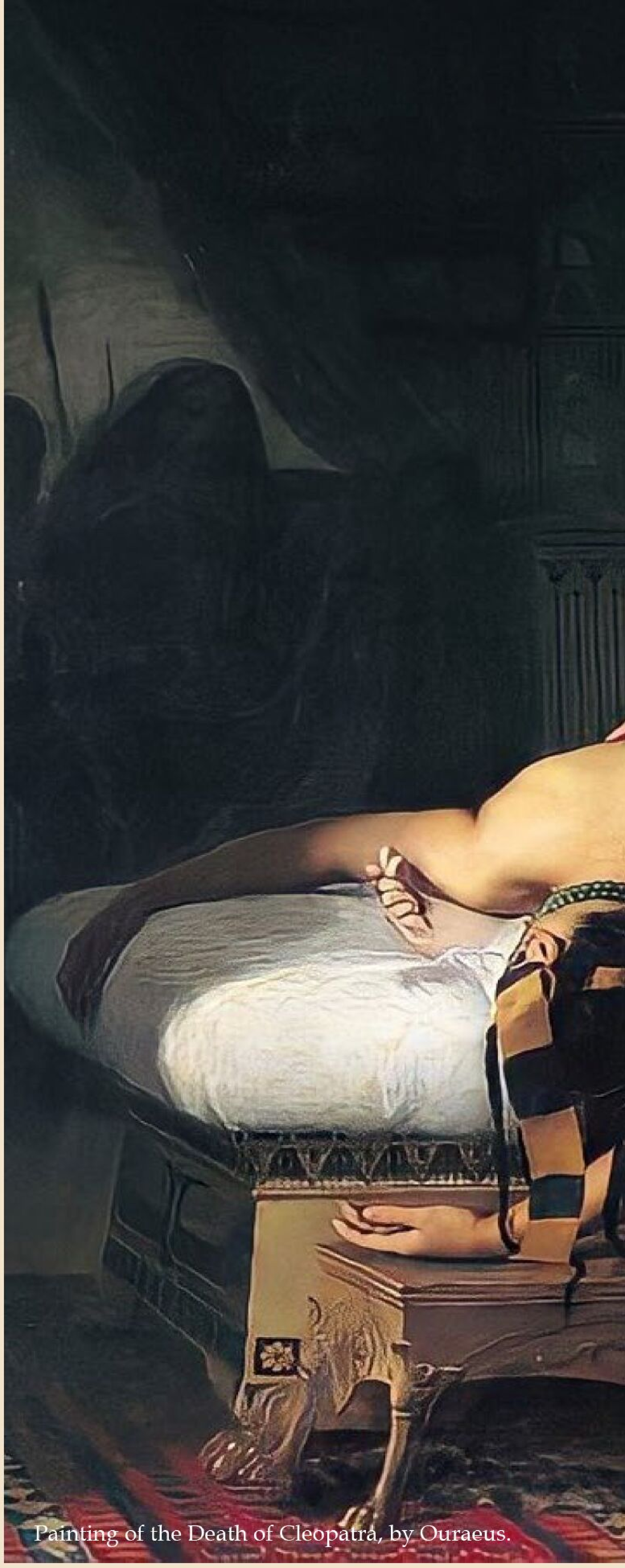
Relief with warriors from Deir el Bahri.

The Sea Peoples' threat was neutralized on Egyptian soil, even as they toppled other empires – a testament to Egypt's superior coordination of intelligence and defensive tactics at the end of the New Kingdom.

Ptolemaic Era: Espionage in the Age of Cleopatra

Egypt's reliance on espionage did not diminish in the final dynasties. Under the Ptolemaic Kingdom (305–30 BCE), Greek rulers of Egypt inherited pharaonic practices and combined them with Hellenistic methods of intelligence. Ptolemaic kings employed networks of informers to monitor both domestic unrest and the shifting politics of the wider Mediterranean world. By the time of Cleopatra VII – the last Ptolemaic queen – Egyptian espionage was as sophisticated as ever, even as Rome's shadow loomed large. Ancient writers and modern analyses suggest that Cleopatra maintained an extensive spy network that reached into

foreign courts and tracked events abroad. For example, Cleopatra's agents kept her informed about affairs in Rome and the ambitions of rival leaders, allowing her to respond deftly to changing political winds. Her network gathered intelligence on visiting dignitaries and troop movements, as well as the activities of her own siblings who contested her throne. This foreknowledge enabled Cleopatra to stage-manage key encounters – famously, she arranged her dramatic meeting with Julius Caesar (legend says she had herself smuggled into his quarters in a rug) likely with insider information guiding her approach. Later, during her alliance with Mark Antony, Cleopatra's spies would have been vital in relaying news of Octavian's propaganda war and military preparations in the lead-up to the final conflict. While specific "battlefield spies" are less documented in the Ptolemaic era, diplomacy and espionage were deeply intertwined. Cleopatra used trusted couriers and informants to negotiate with distant powers and even to attempt subterfuge; one account hints she tried to secretly communicate with Octavian to preserve her dynasty as Antony's fortunes waned. Ultimately, Cleopatra's forces were defeated at Actium (31 BCE) by Octavian's fleet – a battle more decided by naval tactics and Antony's errors than by spy-craft. Yet, Cleopatra's reign underscores that intelligence gathering had become a permanent instrument of state: even in peace, she leveraged information to maintain an edge. Greco-Roman historians later marveled at her political acumen, which in no small part rested on her ability to know more about her rivals than they knew about her.



Painting of the Death of Cleopatra, by Ouraeus.

Sahraya/ AdobeStock

Structure and Methods of Ancient Egyptian Espionage

Across these eras, Egyptian espionage was not a single institution but a spectrum of practices serving military, political, and even economic goals. Several key methods of intelligence gathering can be discerned:

Spies and Undercover Agents: Egyptian rulers deployed individuals to operate in secret beyond Egypt's borders or within suspect populations at home. These spies might be merchants, envoys, or local collaborators who could travel freely and report back. In wartime, they included informants planted in enemy ranks (as the Hittites did to Ramesses II) or double agents turned to feed false information. We see evidence of this in the two Hittite agents who misled Ramesses at Kadesh, as well as in Egyptian efforts to recruit informers among Asiatic and Nubian tribes during

Carl Oderich, The Lion Battle of Ramses II.

concoctions from snake venom or lethal herbs to dispatch enemies or incapacitate key figures. This melding of spying and covert action made the Egyptian spy a versatile but feared operative.

Scouts and Reconnaissance: In battle, Egyptians did not rely on luck to discover enemy positions – they sent out scouts (medjay desert scouts, charioteer patrols, etc.) to reconnoiter. Scouts were essentially military spies on the move, gathering real-time intelligence on terrain and opposing forces. Nearly every major campaign account references advance parties or patrols. Before Megiddo, Thutmose III's scouts likely scouted the Aruna pass and confirmed its viability. During Ramesses II's march to Kadesh, Egyptian scout units were actively patrolling – which is how they managed to capture the lurking Hittite spies in time. Egyptian scouts, often drawn from Nubian or Bedouin auxiliaries with knowledge of the land, surveyed borderlands and acted as early warning systems.

On Egypt's frontiers, fortresses like those in the Sinai and Nubia served as intelligence outposts, dispatching scouts to track movements of desert tribes or invaders. A vivid example is Papyrus Anastasi V (c. 1200 BCE), a report by an Egyptian officer on the eastern frontier: it describes a scout relaying news of two runaway slaves passing a certain fort, prompting an immediate hunt. This shows how even in peacetime, scouts gathered information that was quickly communicated through a hierarchy of messengers – a system equally valuable for military alerts.

Local Informants and Diplomacy: Egyptians often leveraged diplomatic channels and local allies as sources of intel. The Amarna Letters (14th century BCE) – correspondence between Pharaoh Akhenaten and his Canaanite vassals – reveal vassal kings regularly apprising Egypt of regional threats. For instance, letters from Byblos and Jerusalem beg the pharaoh for help against rebels and invaders, effectively serving as intelligence reports on the destabilization of Egyptian territories.

Foreign diplomats and travelers in Egypt were likely watched by the pharaoh's agents (a practice later echoed by the Ptolemies, who monitored Roman envoys). Conversely, Egyptian envoys abroad gathered useful political gossip under the guise of formal diplomacy. Interception of enemy communications was another method: Kamose's seizure of the Hyksos-Kushite letter is the clearest case, but surely not the only time messages were intercepted by border officials. In the Ptolemaic period, diplomacy became even more crucial. Queens and kings engaged in palace intrigues via correspondence, and Cleopatra famously cultivated Roman leaders – Caesar and Antony – partly through very well-informed flattery and negotiation. The integration

of diplomatic missions with intelligence aims was a hallmark of ancient statecraft, and Egypt was no exception.

Communication and Cryptography: To make use of intelligence, Egyptians developed means to securely transmit information. Royal couriers could cover great distances, and relay stations along the Nile or in Asia provided fresh runners. To protect sensitive messages from prying eyes, Egyptian spies are credited with pioneering early encryption techniques.
There is evidence that they used coded language and even invisible inks to conceal the content of written dispatches. Messages might be hidden inside clothing or hollowed objects for secrecy. While specifics are scant, references in later Greek sources and modern analyses suggest the pharaohs valued secure communication. For example, one papyrus hints at a "secret script" for urgent messages to the frontier. Moreover, the bureaucracy itself acted as an intelligence archive – detailed records of foreign lands (geographies, tribute lists, even lists of enemy chiefs) were maintained, amounting to an information database that could be consulted in war planning. All these measures indicate that by the Late Period, Egypt possessed a "thoroughly developed system for the acquisition of intelligence," comparable in principle to modern intelligence services.

In summary, ancient Egyptian espionage was multifaceted, combining stealth, deception, and analysis. The pharaohs viewed intelligence as a force-multiplier: it amplified the effectiveness of their armies and the security of their rule. Whether through beating out secrets from captured spies or exchanging coded letters with allies, Egyptians practiced a form of the "Great Game" millennia before that term was coined. And, as the next section shows, these efforts often paid rich dividends at pivotal moments in history.

Impact and Legacy of Espionage

Throughout Egyptian history, espionage and intelligence operations demonstrably influenced the outcomes of battles and political struggles. A pattern emerges when examining the major events discussed:

At Megiddo, Thutmose III's victory – effectively the first recorded battle in history – hinged on information that allowed a surprise attack. The psychological impact of that triumph cemented Egypt's dominance in Canaan for decades. Without the intelligence

Gatherina/AdobeStock

that the enemy was unprepared and divided, Thutmose might have chosen a slower approach, potentially giving the rebels time to unite. Instead, Egyptian intelligence helped initiate an empire.

At Kadesh, the near-disaster for Ramesses II underscored the perils of faulty intelligence. The episode became almost didactic in Egyptian lore, illustrating why skepticism and verification are crucial. In its aftermath, Egyptian scribes immortalized the spying and counter-spying in reliefs, effectively warning future commanders: trust information only when tested.
This legacy perhaps influenced later pharaohs like Thutmose IV and Seti I in their Syrian campaigns to be more cautious. Notably, Ramesses II concluded the first recorded peace treaty with the Hittites years later – a sign that when war proved inconclusive even a great warrior-pharaoh saw value in diplomacy over risky military gambits in an age of espionage.

In the War with the Sea Peoples, intelligence and strategy saved Egypt from the systemic collapse that befell many Late Bronze Age civilizations. Ramesses III's successful use of espionage and tactical deception meant Egypt alone survived intact while others burned.
This had immense legacy value: Egypt's continuity into the Iron Age (and the preservation of its culture) can be partly credited to effective intelligence-driven defense. It is a striking historical "what-if" that, without the spies and scouts that warned of the Sea Peoples, Egyptian

civilization might have fallen c. 1175 BCE, altering the course of Mediterranean history.

Under Cleopatra, espionage played a subtler but pivotal role in diplomacy. Her reign's key events – aligning with Julius Caesar, forming an alliance (and romantic union) with Mark Antony, and navigating the rivalry with Octavian – were all informed by intelligence. Cleopatra's ability to quickly learn of Julius Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE, or of Octavian's propaganda against her, allowed her to react proactively (for instance, by declaring her son Caesarion co-ruler to strengthen her legitimacy after Caesar's death).
Ultimately, Octavian's superior forces prevailed, but even then Cleopatra attempted secret negotiations, implying she kept intelligence channels open until the end. The legacy here is the demonstration that espionage was not only a military tool but also a political one. Ptolemaic Egypt had a kind of "foreign intelligence service" monitoring Rome and the East, presaging how future states (like the Roman Empire itself) would institutionalize such practices.

In all these cases, we see that information – gathered, filtered, and acted upon – was often as decisive as swords and spears. Egyptian commanders who used intelligence well (Thutmose III, Ramesses III) achieved great successes, while those who were outfoxed (as Ramesses II initially was) faced peril. Over time, the consistent payoff from espionage meant it became ingrained in Egyptian military doctrine and royal policy.
By Cleopatra's era, the notion that a ruler must have a "vast network of spies" at her disposal was taken for granted. This ancient wisdom resonates through history: nearly every empire thereafter echoed the Egyptian understanding that knowledge is the surest weapon.

From the dawn of Egyptian civilization to its final queen, espionage remained a cornerstone of strategy and statecraft. The Old Kingdom pharaohs used spies to maintain maat (order) at home and identify new lands to conquer.
The New Kingdom pharaohs refined military intelligence, coordinating scouts, informants, and diplomatic correspondence to become masters of the Near East. And the Ptolemaic rulers, facing an age of international realpolitik, expanded

Egypt's espionage horizons to foreign capitals and battlefields far from the Nile. These efforts not only protected Egypt's sovereignty but also directly shaped famous historical events – turning potential defeats into victories (and occasionally vice versa). Moreover, ancient Egyptian innovations in secret communication, counter-intelligence, and covert operations contributed to the broader evolution of espionage tradecraft. In studying ancient Egypt's "war of shadows," we gain insight into the sophistication of early intelligence operations. The image of Egyptian agents hiding messages in their clothing or developing coded writings and invisible inks to safeguard state secrets is a reminder that the quest for secure information is as old as writing itself. Likewise, the scene of Ramesses II torturing spies for the truth is an uncomfortable precursor to methods of interrogation used in much later times. These parallels highlight a continuity: despite changes in technology and context, the fundamental practices and ethical dilemmas of espionage have echoes across millennia.

Ancient Egypt's experiences affirm that espionage often thrives in the gaps of conventional force – it is the unseen blade that

SVasco/ AdobeStock

can tip the scales. For Egypt, a civilization often surrounded by rivals and periodically wracked by internal strife, the ability to gather intelligence and deceive adversaries was indispensable. The pharaohs who embraced espionage, making use of "the eyes and ears of Pharaoh," generally fared better than those who did not.

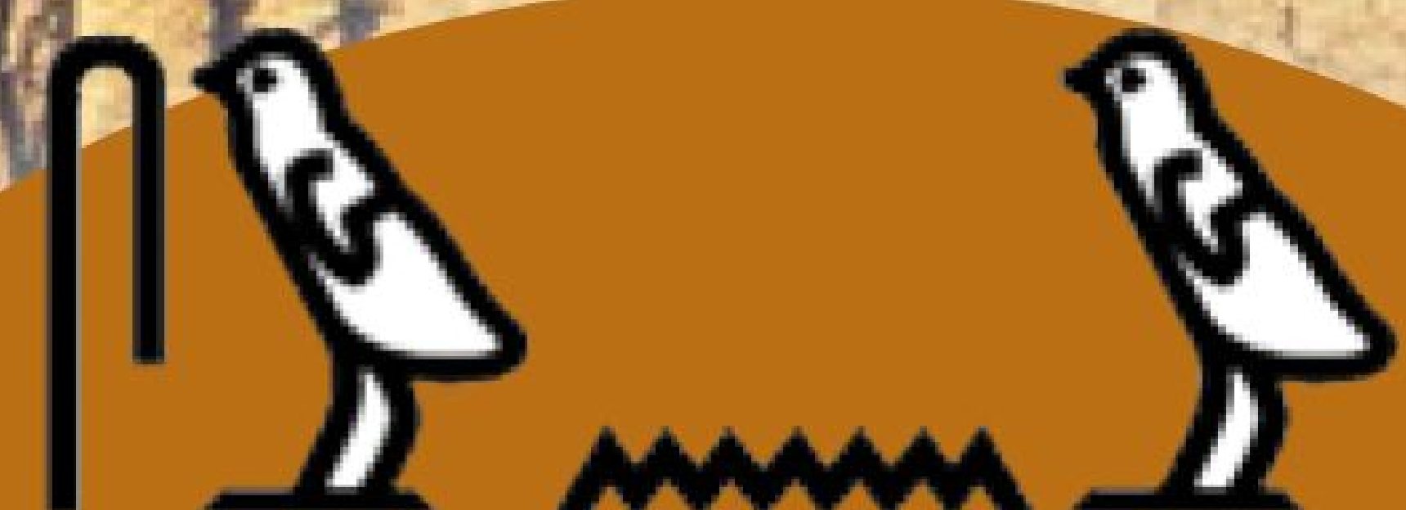
Cleopatra's fall may have ended Egypt's independence, but it did not end the legacy of Egyptian espionage: Roman and Arab administrators in later centuries continued to utilize many networks and methods established in pharaonic times.

In conclusion, espionage in ancient Egypt was a dynamic and decisive force from the Old Kingdom through Cleopatra's reign. It evolved from simple scouting and surveillance into a complex apparatus involving spies, scouts, informants, and diplomats working in concert. Major military campaigns – from Thutmose III's Asiatic wars to the showdowns of the Ptolemies – cannot be fully understood without acknowledging this hidden dimension. Ancient Egyptian history teaches us that while battles are won on the field, the road to victory often begins in the shadows, with a whispered warning, a secret letter, or a spy in the enemy's camp. ■

SWNW, WPWTY, AND REKHYT

Terminology of Intelligence Operatives in Ancient Egyptian Texts

Ancient Egyptian sources make reference to a variety of roles and designations that suggest the presence of a structured intelligence apparatus, particularly in military and diplomatic contexts. While the Egyptians did not possess a centralized institution akin to a modern intelligence agency, several terms found in inscriptions, papyri, and royal annals point to the existence of individuals tasked with reconnaissance, covert communication, and information gathering. Three notable terms are swnw, wpwty, and rekhyt, each of which reveals distinct aspects of Egypt's approach to intelligence operations.



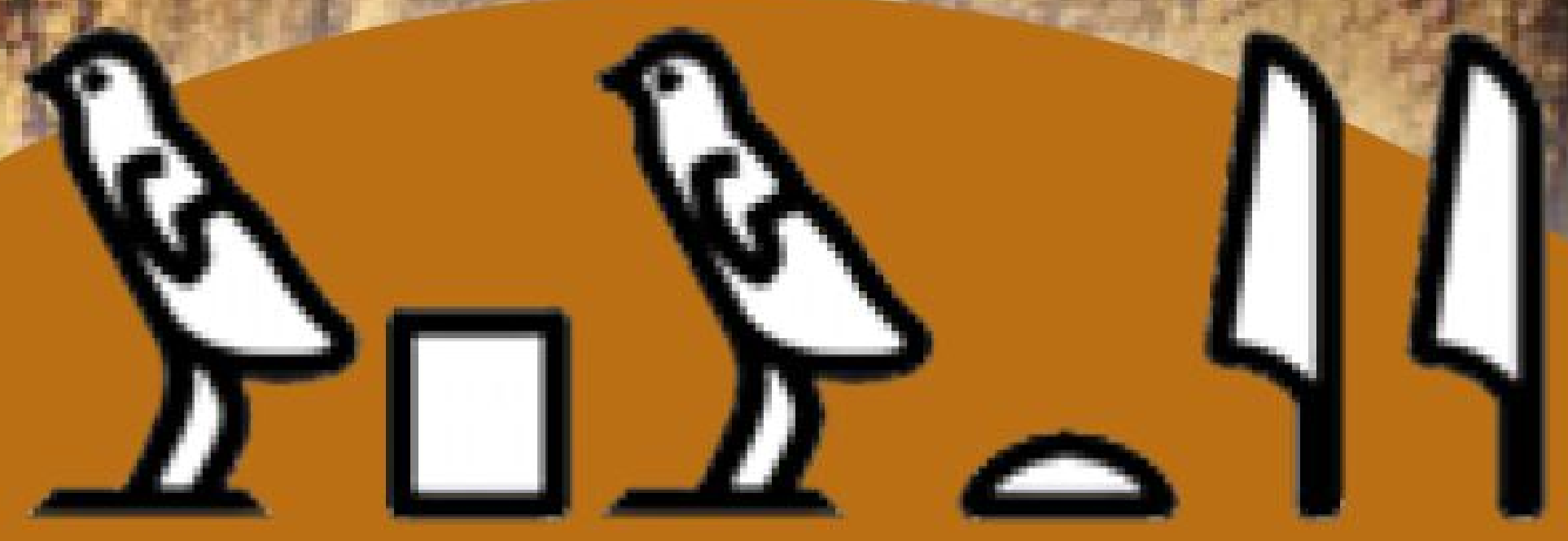
SWNW, often translated as "scouts," were military reconnaissance agents deployed ahead of Egyptian forces. These operatives played a crucial role in battlefield planning by surveying terrain, identifying enemy positions, and ensuring safe passage for advancing troops. Texts from the New Kingdom, particularly in the military annals of Thutmose III and Ramesses II, reference the activities of swnw in the lead-up to engagements such as the Battle of Megiddo and the Battle of Kadesh. Their function closely parallels that of light cavalry scouts or forward observers in later military traditions, and their intelligence was instrumental in enabling strategic maneuvers and surprise attacks. A Karnak Temple inscription praises their role: "The scouts went forth like hawks, their eyes piercing the land of the rebels."

Together, these terms reflect the multifaceted nature of intelligence work in ancient Egypt. Rather than relying on a single class of operatives, the Egyptians appear to have employed a flexible array of

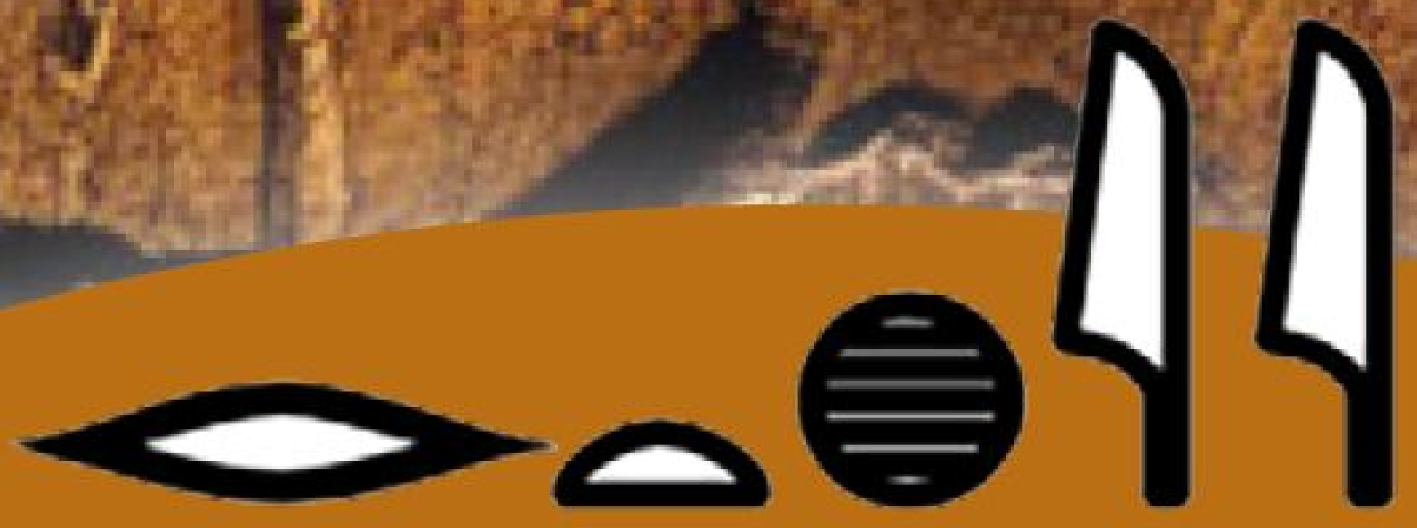
Dznitry/AdobeStock

personnel suited to different environments—swnw on the battlefield, wpwty in foreign courts, and rekhyt among the general populace. This vocabulary underscores the sophistication of Egypt's surveillance and information systems, particularly during periods of imperial expansion and geopolitical competition. As the Harris Papyrus (Ramses III's reign) declares:

"The land is safe when the silent ones walk its borders and the unseen move through its cities."



WPWTY, literally meaning "messengers" or "emissaries," occupied a dual role as both official couriers and potential intelligence agents. In formal contexts, wpwty served as the bearers of royal decrees and diplomatic correspondence, especially during Egypt's dealings with vassal states and foreign powers in the Levant. However, the nature of their travel—across borders and into foreign courts—made them ideal conduits for the collection of sensitive information. In texts such as the Amarna Letters, Egyptian envoys are shown to possess intimate knowledge of local political dynamics, implying that wpwty may have also operated as spies under the guise of diplomacy, reporting back on the loyalty of foreign rulers or the movements of rival armies.



The term **REKHYT**, more ambiguous in meaning, has been interpreted as "the knowledgeable" or "the informed ones." Traditionally, rekhyt referred to common people or the populace, but in certain administrative and literary contexts, the term appears to take on a more nuanced connotation. Scholars have suggested that in such cases, rekhyt might denote individuals with access to particular types of knowledge—possibly local informants, embedded collaborators, or individuals with firsthand information about regional affairs. If this interpretation holds, rekhyt may represent an early form of a civilian intelligence network, one that supplemented the efforts of military and diplomatic personnel by providing grassroots-level insights into unrest, conspiracies, or foreign intentions.

FROM OLYMPUS TO OBLIVION

The Untold Story of Ancient

Explore the dazzling ascent of Greek civilization and the forces that led to its demise

BY IOANNIS SYRIGOS

t Greece's Fall

The Ancient Greeks gave us democracy, philosophy, the Olympic Games, and epic tales of gods and heroes. They built some of the most advanced cities of the ancient world, developed revolutionary ideas in government, and even defeated the mighty Persian Empire. But despite their golden age, their empire eventually crumbled—brought down by internal conflicts, rivalries, and foreign invasion. So what exactly led to the rise and eventual downfall of one of the greatest civilizations in history? Let's dive into the glory and collapse of Ancient Greece.

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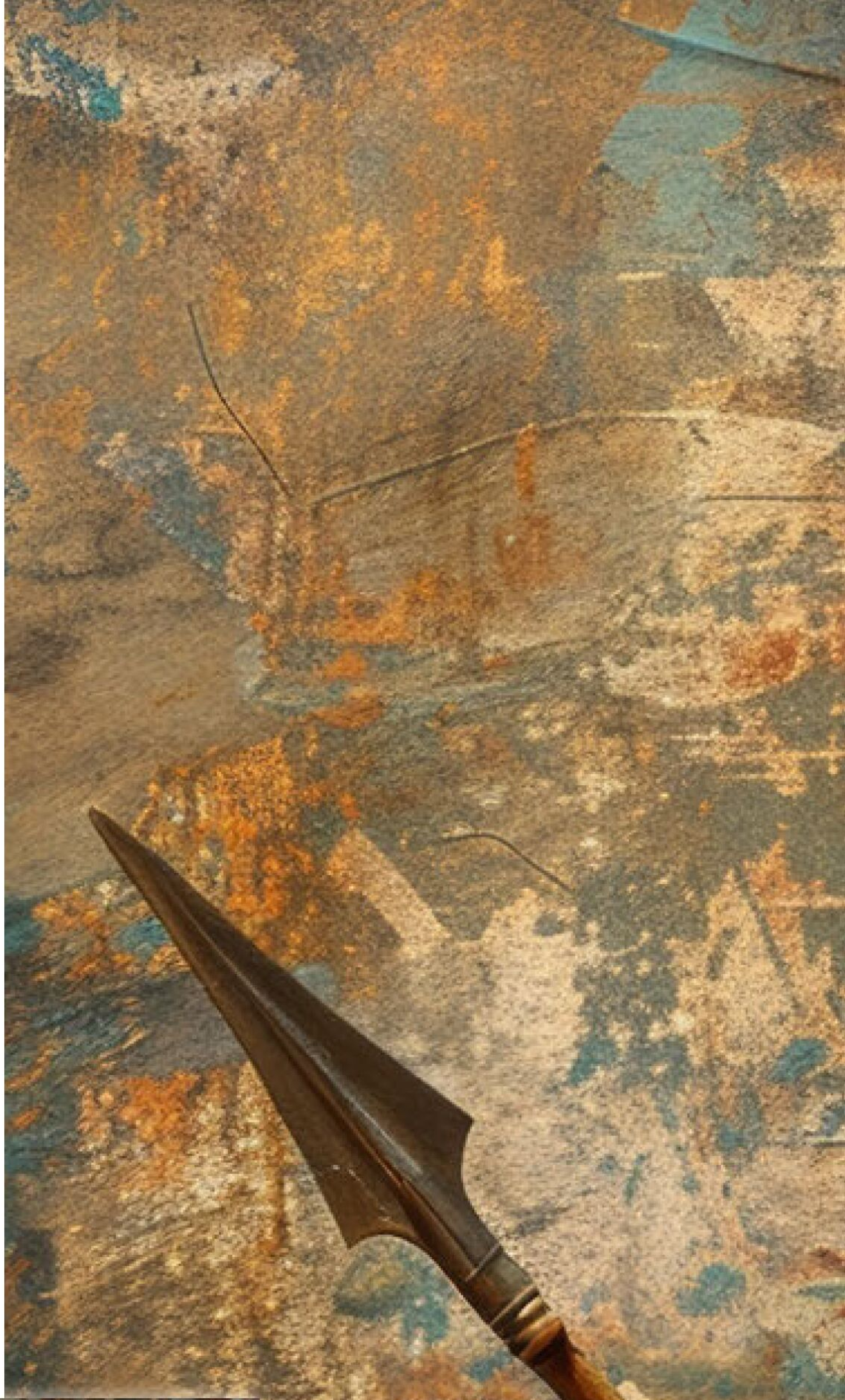
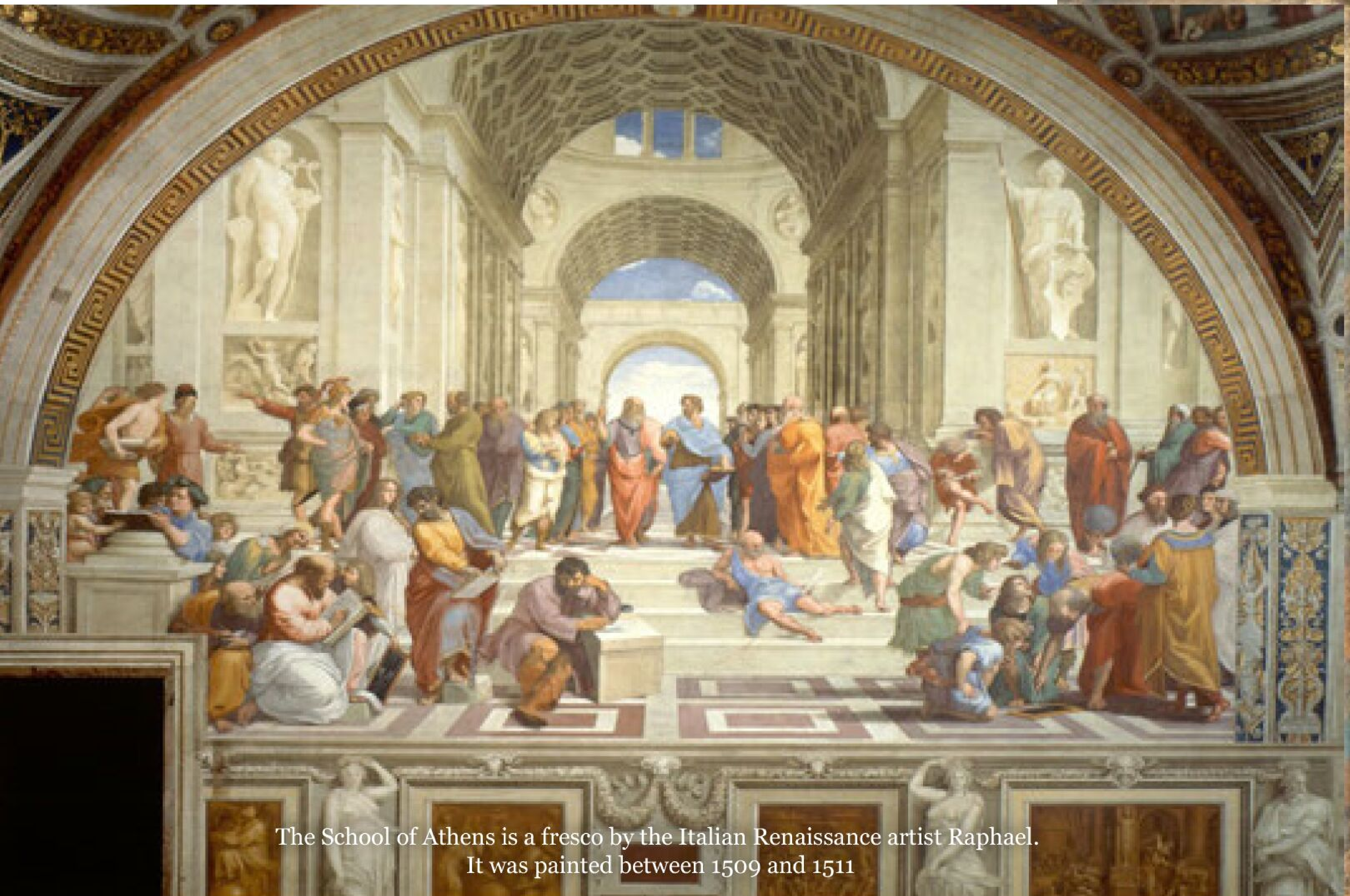
The Rise: From City-States to a Superpower

Ancient Greece was never a single, unified empire like Egypt or Persia. Instead, it was a collection of fiercely independent city-states, known as poleis, including Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and Corinth. These city-states were often in competition with one another, but rather than weakening Greece, this rivalry fuelled innovation, pushing them to develop groundbreaking political systems, military strategies, and philosophical thought. Unlike kingdoms ruled by absolute monarchs, Greek city-states experimented with different forms of governance, from Athens' radical democracy to Sparta's military-driven oligarchy. This diversity led to a period of unprecedented progress, establishing Greece as a dominant force in the ancient world.

City-States and the Birth of Innovation

The structure of Greek society encouraged rapid development. Athens became the birthplace of democracy, where citizens had a say in government—a revolutionary concept at the time. Meanwhile, Sparta took a different path, becoming a military powerhouse, training its citizens from a young age to be fearless warriors. While their systems differed, both city-states excelled in ways that set Greece apart from its neighbours. The constant exchange of ideas and the competition





The School of Athens is a fresco by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael. It was painted between 1509 and 1511

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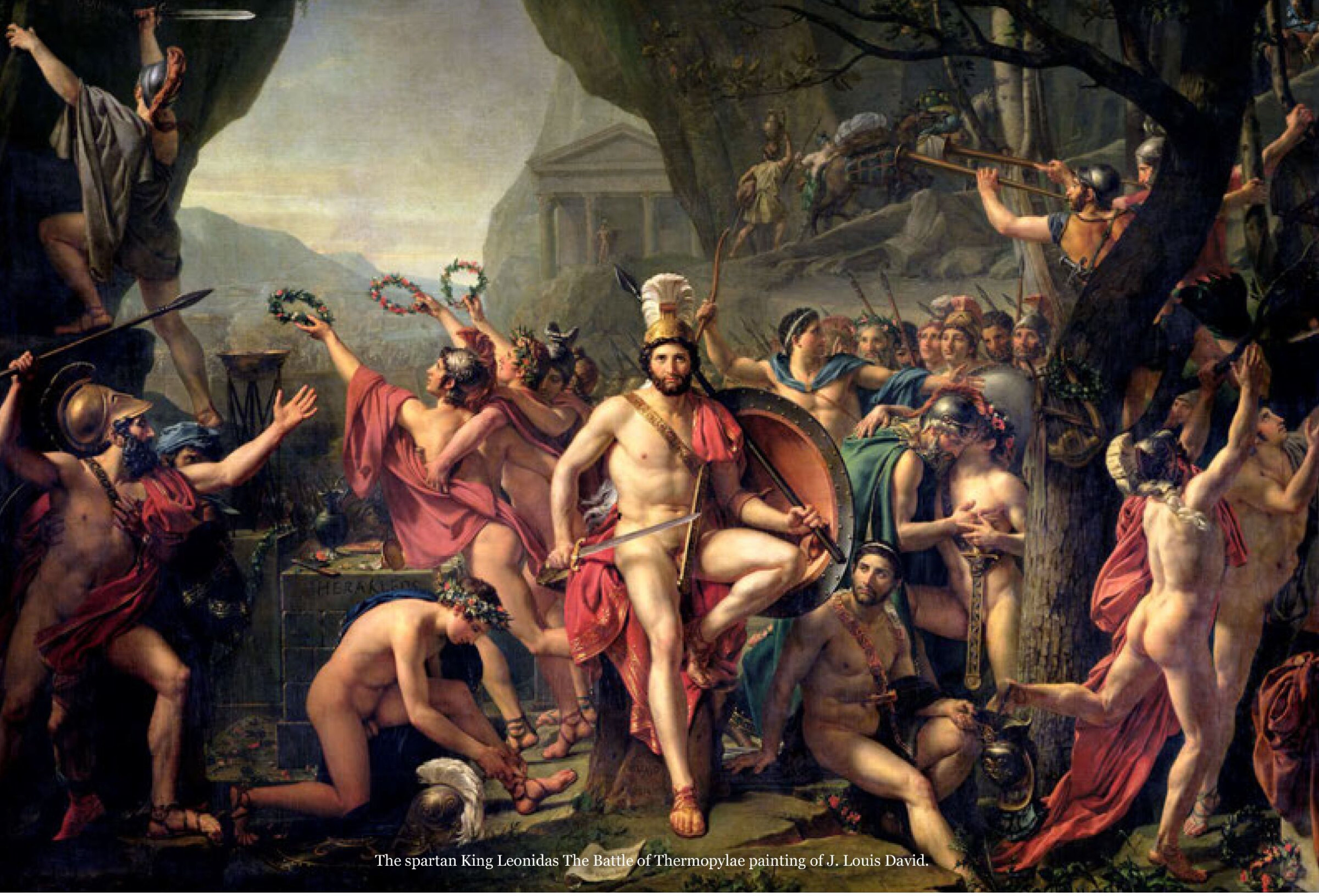
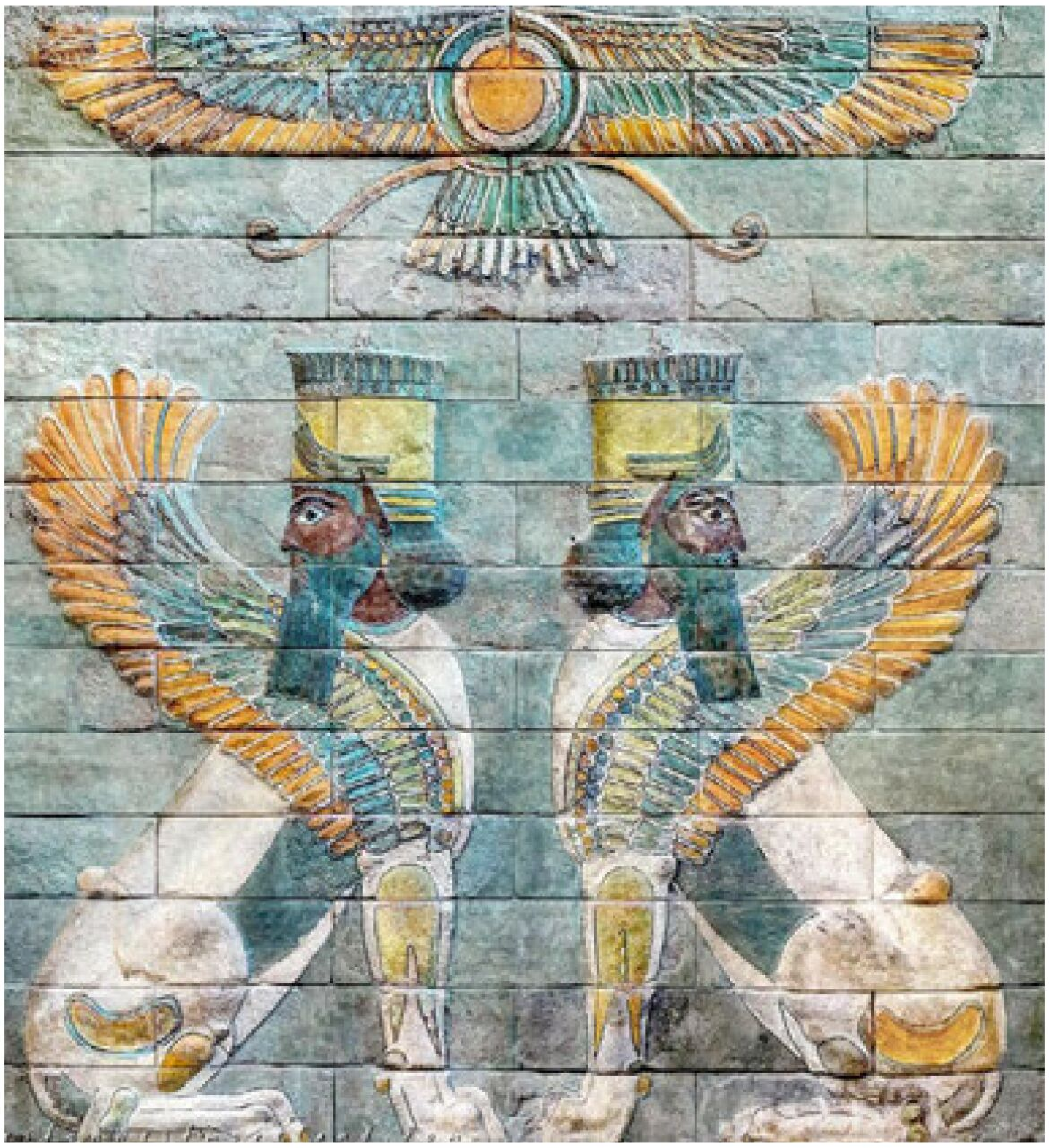


The spartan King Leonidas The Battle of Thermopylae painting of J. Louis David.



between poleis drove intellectual and artistic progress, giving rise to philosophy, theatre, and scientific advancements that would influence the world for millennia.

Military Strength and the Greek Art of War

Greece's rise was also fuelled by its military expertise. Greek armies perfected the phalanx formation, a strategy in which soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder, forming an impenetrable wall of shields and spears. This battle tactic gave Greek armies a major tactical advantage, allowing them to defeat much larger forces. Their military prowess was put to the test in the 5th century BCE, when Greece faced its greatest external threat—the Persian Empire.

The Persian Wars: A Defining Moment

The Persian Empire, led by Darius I and later Xerxes, sought to expand into Greece, launching one of history's most famous invasions. The Greeks, vastly outnumbered, fought back with legendary victories that changed the course of

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history. At the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, the Athenian army miraculously defeated the much larger Persian forces. Ten years later, at Thermopylae, King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans made a heroic last stand against Xerxes' massive army, delaying their advance and inspiring Greek resistance. The turning point came at the Battle of Salamis, where the Athenian navy used clever tactics to destroy the Persian fleet, securing Greece's place as a dominant power in the Mediterranean. With the Persian threat eliminated, Athens entered a golden age of cultural, intellectual, and political achievement. Under the leadership of Pericles, the city flourished, transforming into the intellectual capital of the ancient world. The construction of the Parthenon symbolized Athens' greatness, while philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle laid the foundations for Western thought. This was also the golden

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era of Greek theatre, with playwrights such as Sophocles and Euripides producing works that are still studied today.

Athens became a beacon of progress, but its growing power created tensions with other Greek city-states, especially Sparta, setting the stage for internal conflict.

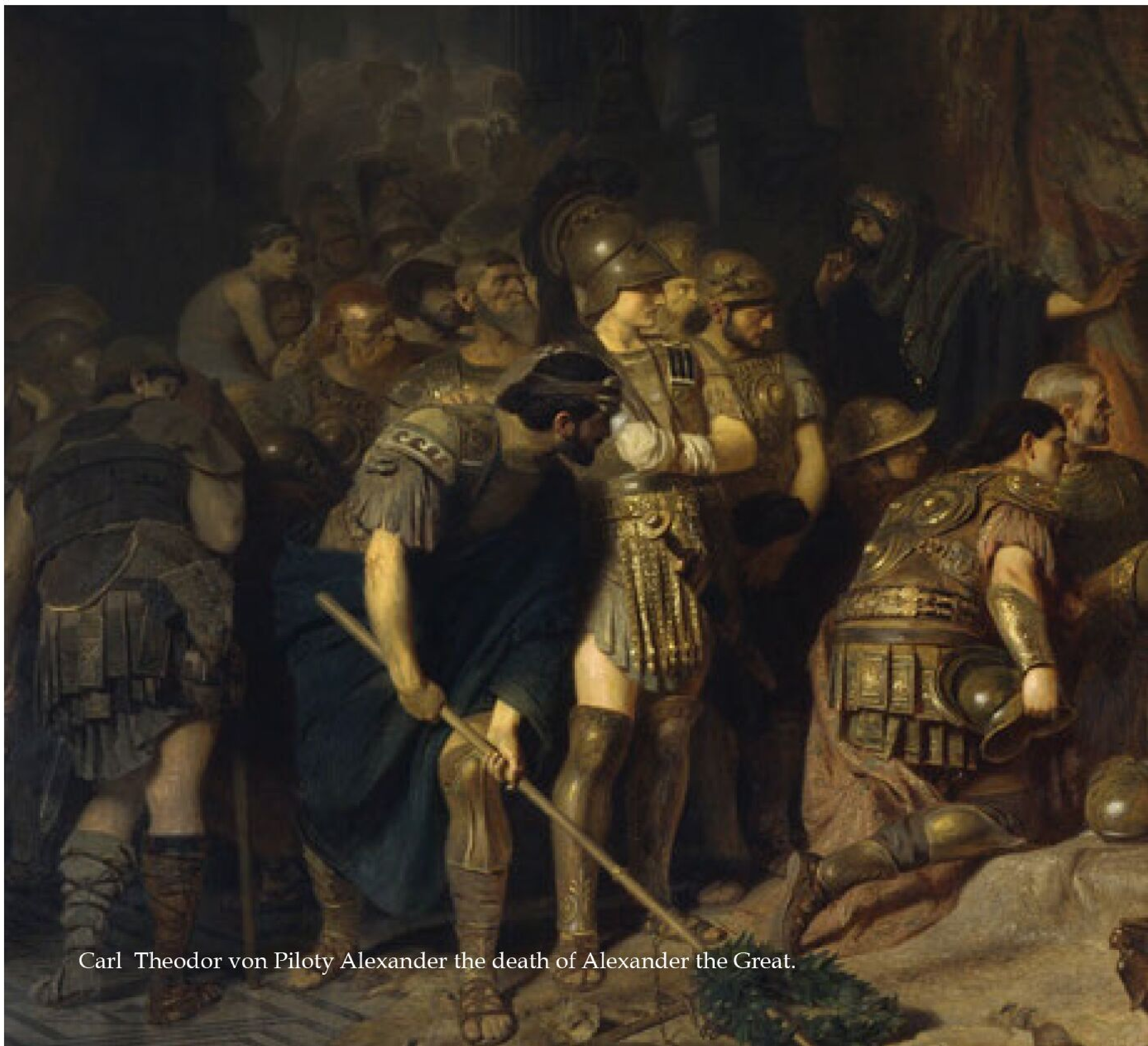
Alexander the Great and the Expansion of Greek Influence

Although Greece remained divided politically, a new power was rising in the north. Macedonia, under King Philip II, conquered the weakened Greek city-states in 338 BCE. But it was Philip's son, Alexander the Great, who would take Greek influence beyond anything the world had seen before. A brilliant military strategist, Alexander launched an ambitious campaign that led to the conquest of Persia, Egypt, and parts of India. His empire stretched across three continents, blending Greek culture with local traditions and giving rise to what historians call the Hellenistic Era. Cities like Alexandria in Egypt became centres of learning and culture, spreading Greek philosophy, science, and art far beyond Greece's original borders.

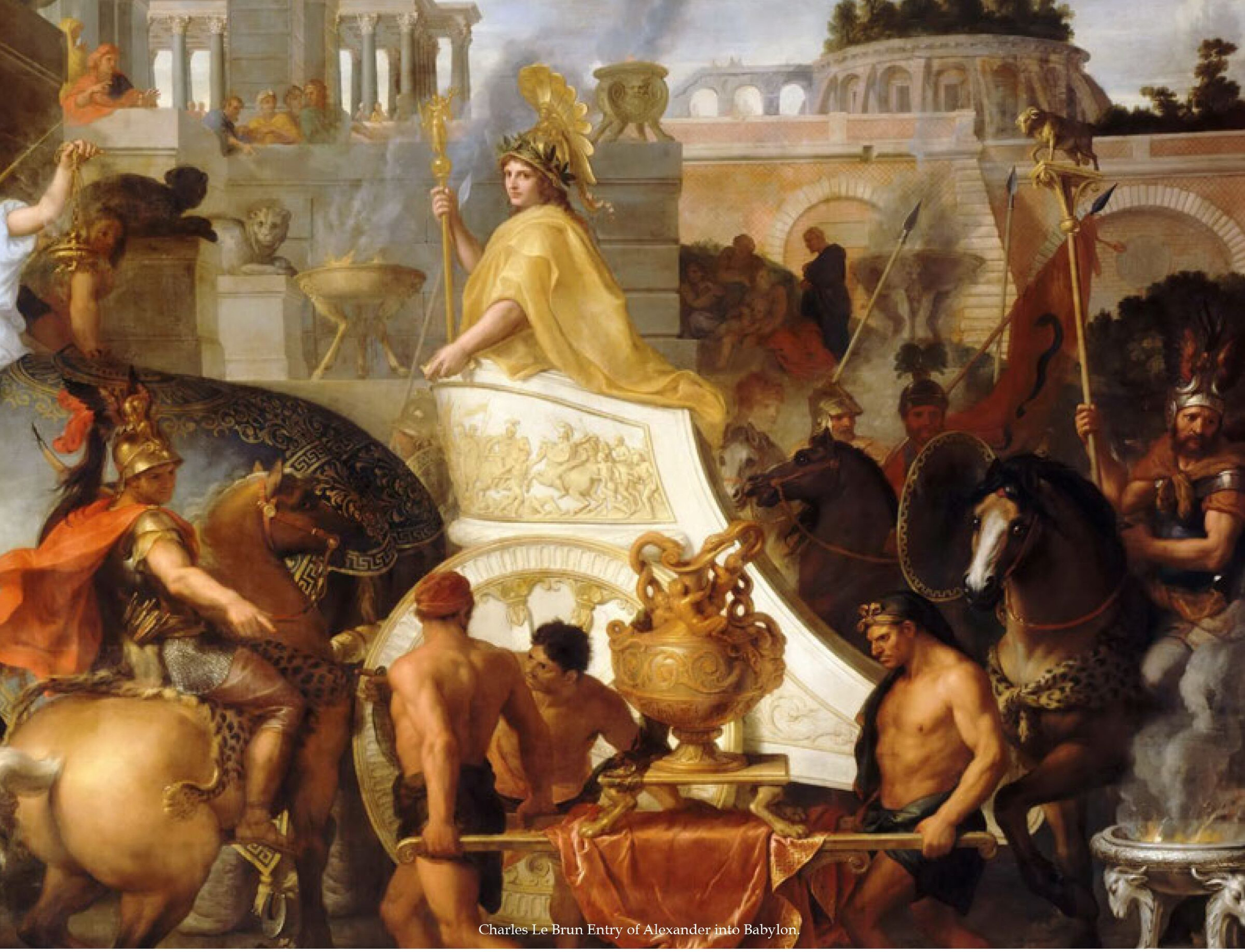
At this point, Greek civilization had reached its peak, its influence shaping the ancient world. However, despite its success, Greece's internal struggles and the rise of new powers would soon bring its dominance to an end.

The Fall: How Greece Lost Its Power

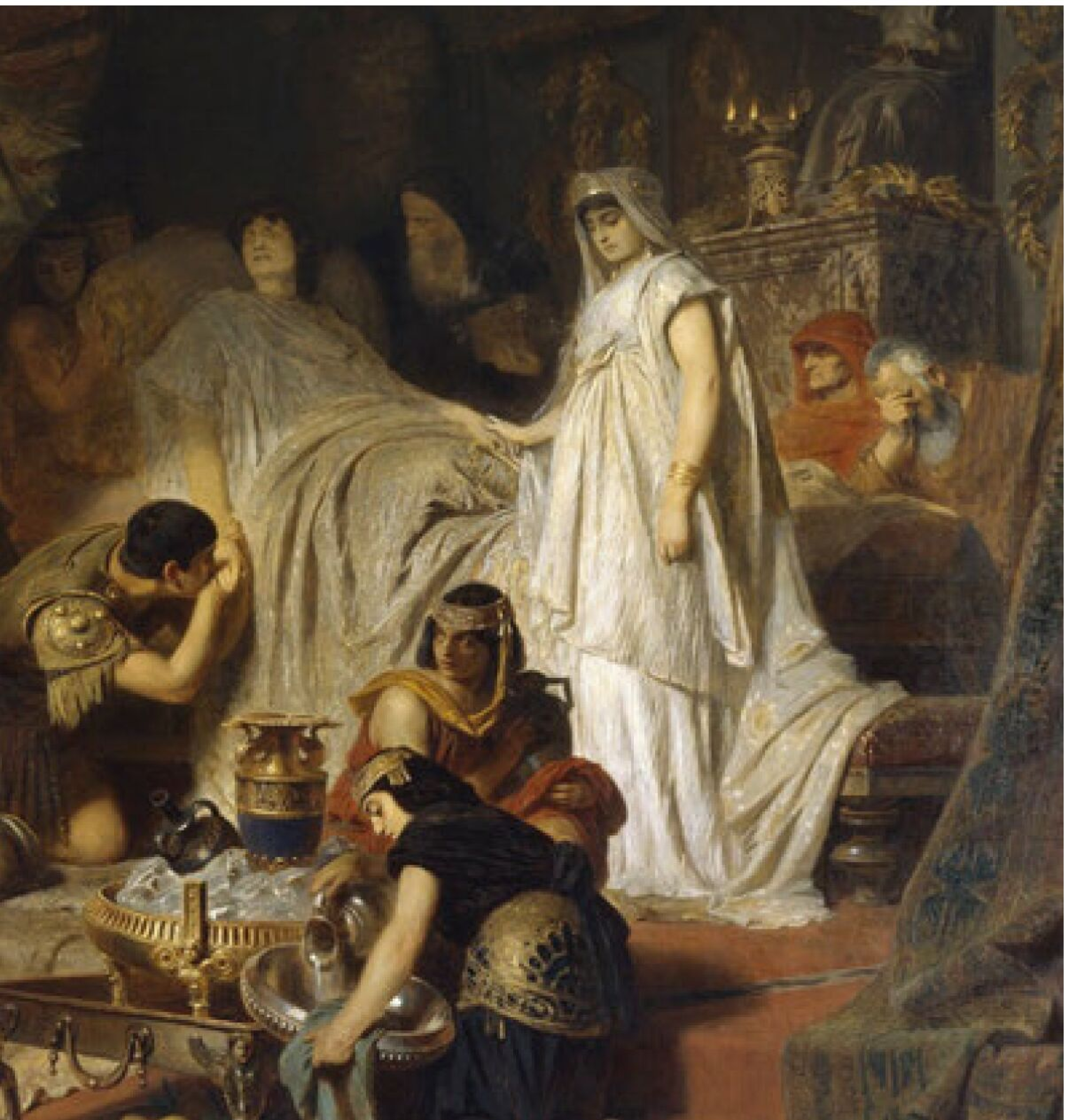
Despite its remarkable achievements in philosophy, science, art, and governance, ancient Greece ultimately fell due to its own internal conflicts and an inability to maintain unity. The same competitive spirit that fuelled Greek innovation and military success also led to constant infighting, leaving the city-states vulnerable to foreign powers. This division created opportunities for stronger, more centralized empires to rise and eventually absorb Greece into their dominions.

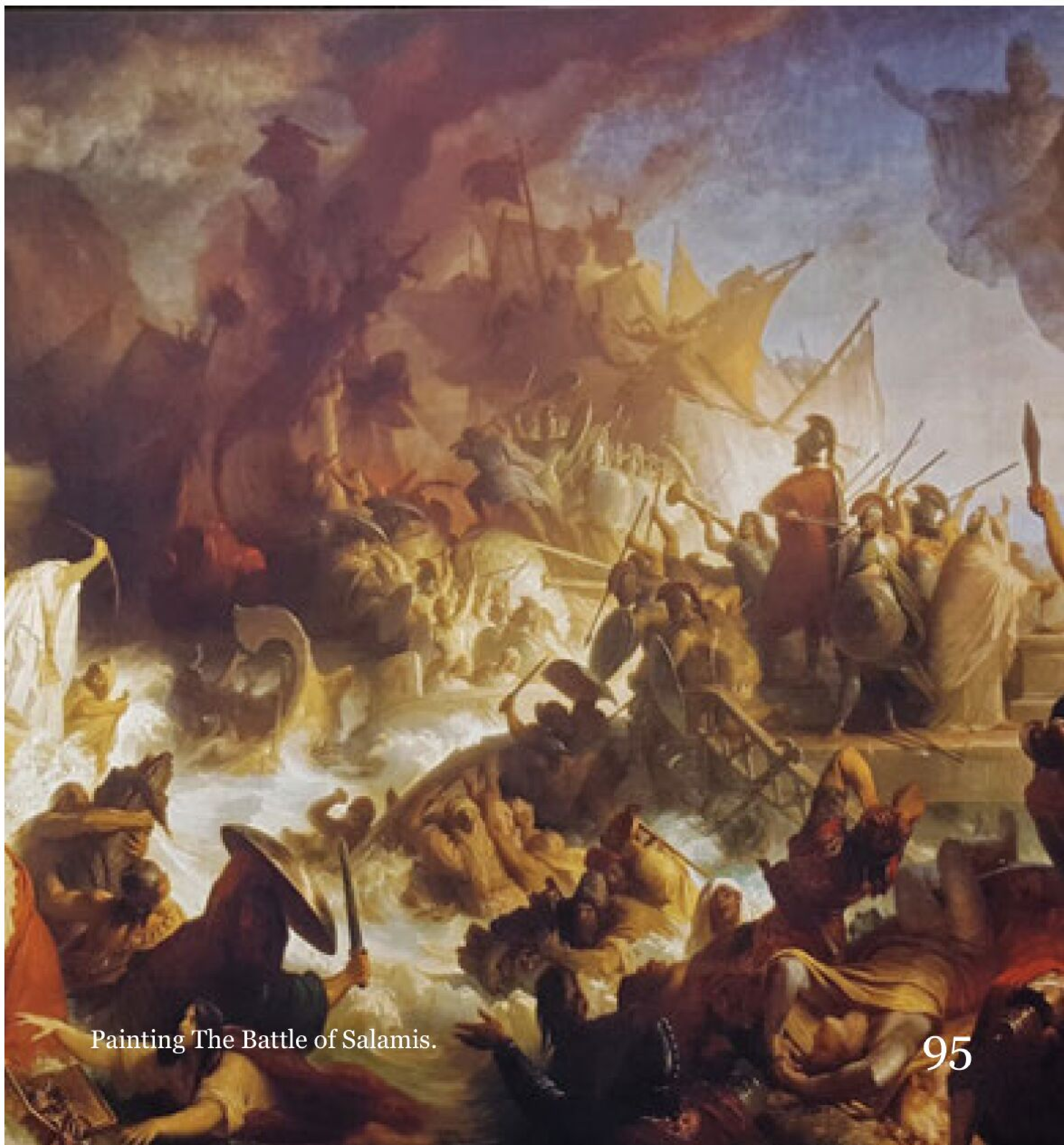


Carl Theodor von Piloty Alexander the death of Alexander the Great.



Charles Le Brun Entry of Alexander into Babylon.





Painting The Battle of Salamis.

What Led to Greece's Downfall?

One of the greatest factors that contributed to Greece's fall was the Peloponnesian War, which erupted in 431 BCE. This devastating conflict was fought between Athens and Sparta, two of Greece's most powerful city-states. Once allies against the Persian Empire, Athens and Sparta became bitter enemies, each seeking dominance over the Greek world.

The war dragged on for nearly three decades, draining the region of resources, causing widespread death and destruction, and shattering any sense of Greek unity. Although Sparta emerged victorious in 404 BCE, it was a hollow victory—Greece as a whole was left weakened, divided, and vulnerable to outside threats.

While the Greek city-states were recovering from decades of war, a powerful new kingdom to the north took advantage of the instability. King Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, seized the opportunity to conquer Greece in 338 BCE. The Greeks, still divided and weakened by internal struggles, were unable to resist his military might. Although Greek culture remained influential, its political independence was effectively lost, and the once-powerful city-states now answered to Macedonian rule.

After the assassination of Philip II, his son Alexander the Great embarked on one of the most extraordinary military campaigns in history, conquering vast territories from Greece to Egypt, Persia, and even India.

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However, after Alexander's sudden death in 323 BCE, his empire fractured as his generals fought for control over different regions. This power struggle further divided Greece, making it increasingly unstable and diminishing its influence in world affairs.

By the 2nd century BCE, another rising superpower, Rome, began expanding its influence into the eastern Mediterranean. The weakened and divided Greek city-states stood no chance against the might of the Roman legions. In 146 BCE, after a decisive battle at Corinth, Greece was officially absorbed into the Roman Empire, marking the end of its independence. Although Greek culture, philosophy, and art continued to shape Roman civilization, Greece itself had lost its power as a dominant force in the ancient world.

The Legacy: Why Greece Still Matters Today

Although Ancient Greece fell as a political power, its cultural influence never truly disappeared. Instead, it was preserved, expanded, and reshaped by the civilizations that followed, particularly the Romans, who admired and adopted much of Greek philosophy, art, and architecture. Through the Roman Empire, these ideas spread throughout Europe and beyond, influencing countless aspects of modern society. Even today, the legacy of Ancient Greece is everywhere, shaping the way we govern, think, build, and tell stories.

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One of Greece's most enduring contributions is democracy, the system of government that continues to define modern politics. The concept of citizens having a voice in governance—which originated in Athens over 2,500 years ago—remains a core principle in many nations worldwide. While democracy has evolved over time, its foundations in civic participation, voting, and the rule of law can be traced back to the early Greek city-states.

Greek philosophy also continues to shape how we understand the world. Thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle laid the groundwork for ethics, logic, political theory, and metaphysics, forming the foundation of Western philosophy. Their ideas still influence education, law, and science, and their works are studied in universities across the globe. Many of the questions they explored—such as the nature of justice, morality, and knowledge—are still debated today.

Architectural styles pioneered by the ancient Greeks remain visible in modern buildings, from government institutions to museums and universities. The use of columns, symmetry, and grand facades—seen in structures like the

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Parthenon—has inspired neoclassical architecture around the world. Buildings such as the U.S. Capitol, the British Museum, and the Supreme Court of the United States all reflect Greek influence, proving that their aesthetic and structural innovations still endure.

Greek mythology, with its epic tales of gods, heroes, and monsters, continues to captivate audiences in books, movies, and popular culture. From Percy Jackson to Marvel's adaptations of Zeus and Hercules, the timeless myths of Ancient Greece still entertain and inspire new generations. These stories, once told around ancient fires, have transcended time to become an integral part of modern storytelling.

Although the physical empire of Greece collapsed, its impact on the world remains eternal. From governments to literature, philosophy to architecture, Greek innovations and ideas continue to shape modern civilization. Without Ancient Greece, the world as we know it would look very different. Their influence is not just a relic of the past—it is a living legacy woven into the fabric of our daily lives. ■

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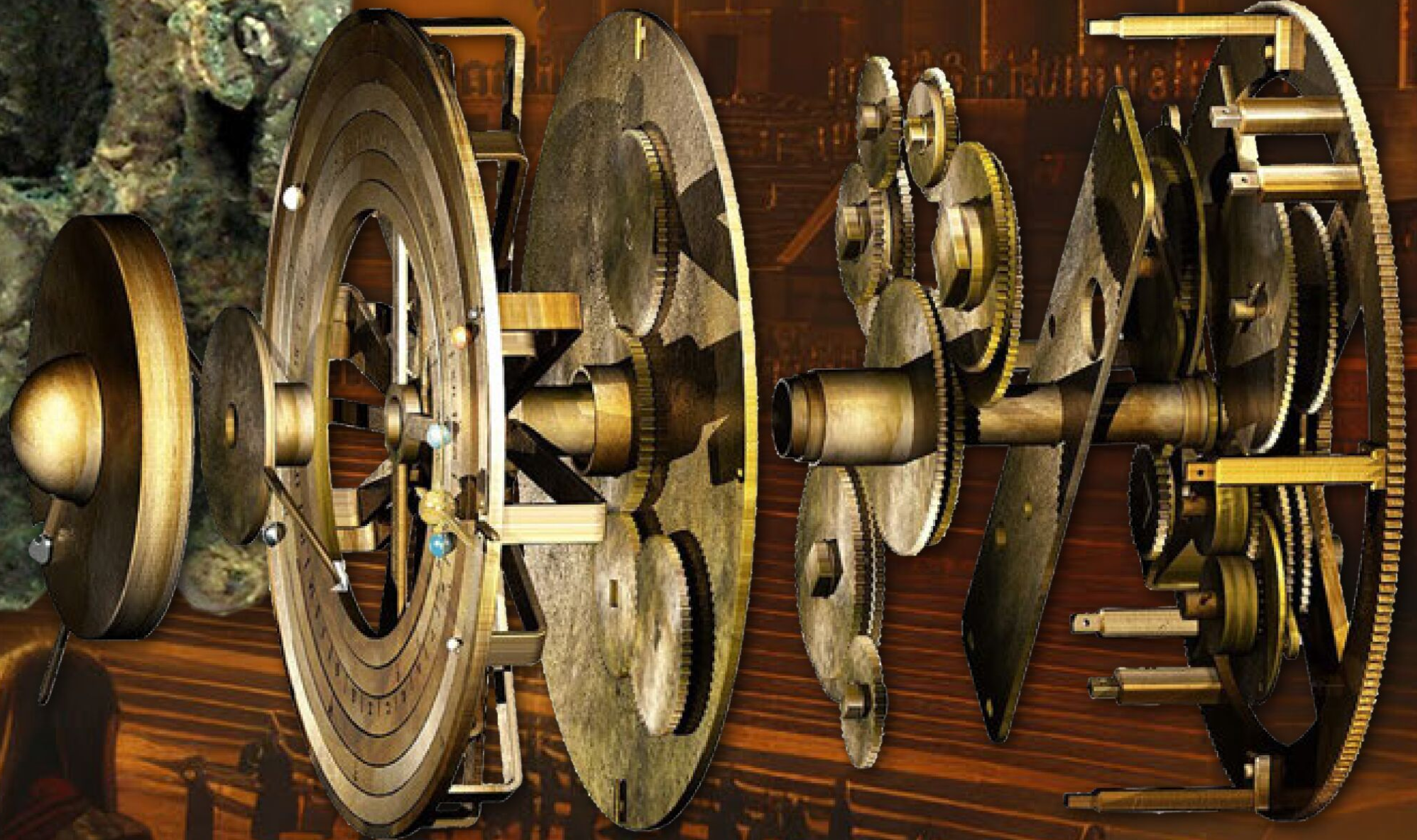
The Ingenious Antikythera Mechanism

Ancient Greece's Cosmic Computer

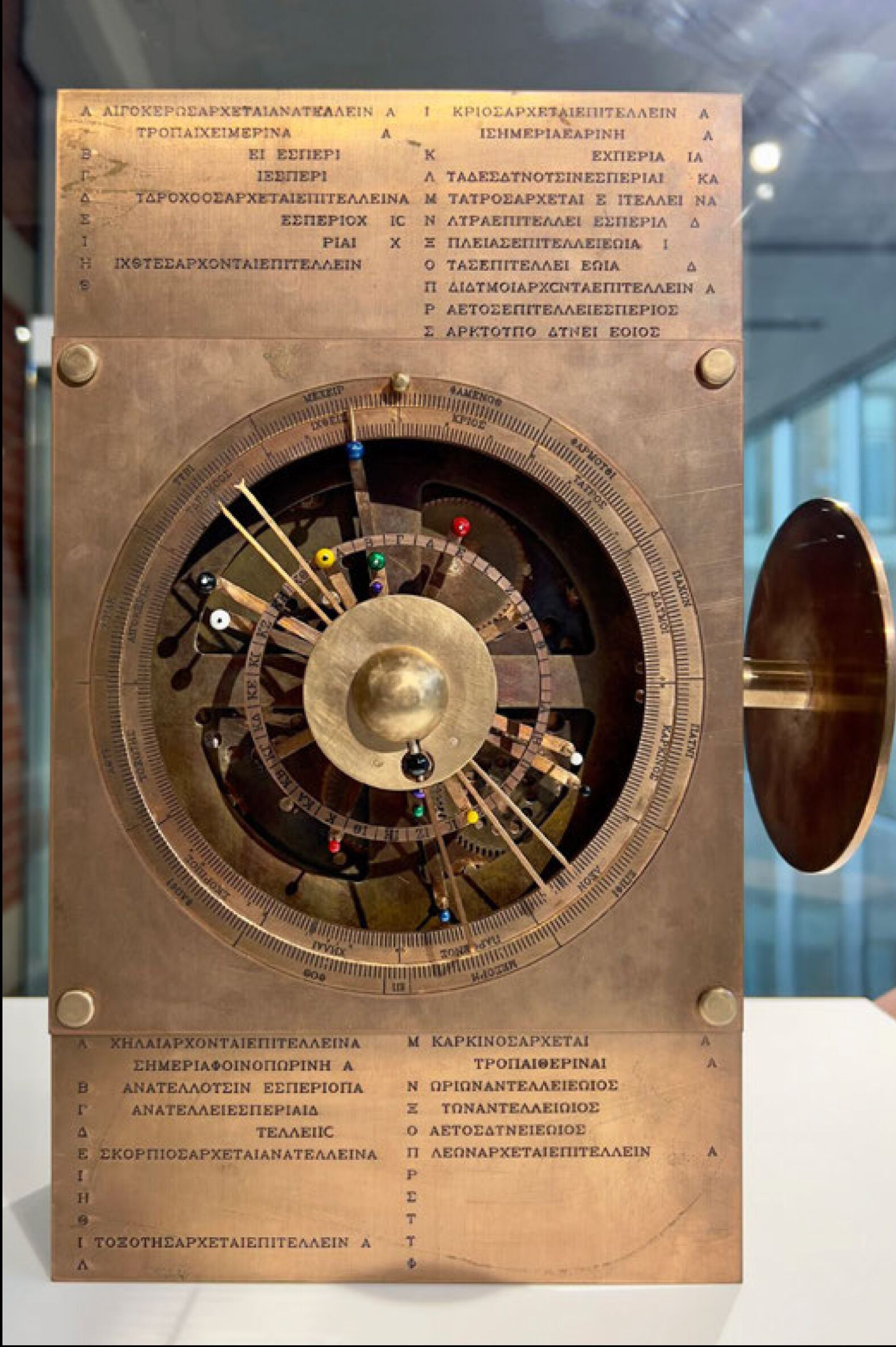
When we think of Ancient Greece, visions of marble temples, philosophers in togas, and epic battles often come to mind. Yet beneath this classical veneer lies an astonishing invention that rewrites our understanding of their technological prowess: the Antikythera Mechanism. Discovered in 1901 amid a shipwreck off the Greek island of Antikythera, this intricate device—dated to around 150–100 BCE—is the world's oldest known analog computer, a marvel of gears and dials that tracked the heavens with uncanny precision. For adults enthralled by ancient history, it's a jaw-dropping testament to Greek ingenuity, blending astronomy, mathematics, and craftsmanship into a tool that feels almost anachronistic in its sophistication.



A Treasure from the Deep

Imagine the scene: divers combing a Roman-era wreck, expecting pottery or coins, instead haul up a corroded bronze lump the size of a shoebox. At first, it's dismissed as junk—until it splits open, revealing a maze of interlocking gears. What they'd found was a revolution frozen in time. Radiocarbon dating and inscriptions link it to the late Hellenistic period, possibly crafted in Rhodes, a hub of astronomy where Hipparchus, the era's greatest stargazer, once worked. The ship sank around 70 BCE, carrying this treasure to the seabed, where it lay for two millennia until its rediscovery.

The Antikythera Mechanism isn't much to look at now—its 82 surviving fragments, housed in Athens' National Archaeological Museum, are green with corrosion. But X-rays and 3D modelling have peeled back its secrets, revealing over 30 gears, some as small as a fingernail, packed into a wooden case. Its dials and pointers, inscribed with Greek text, tracked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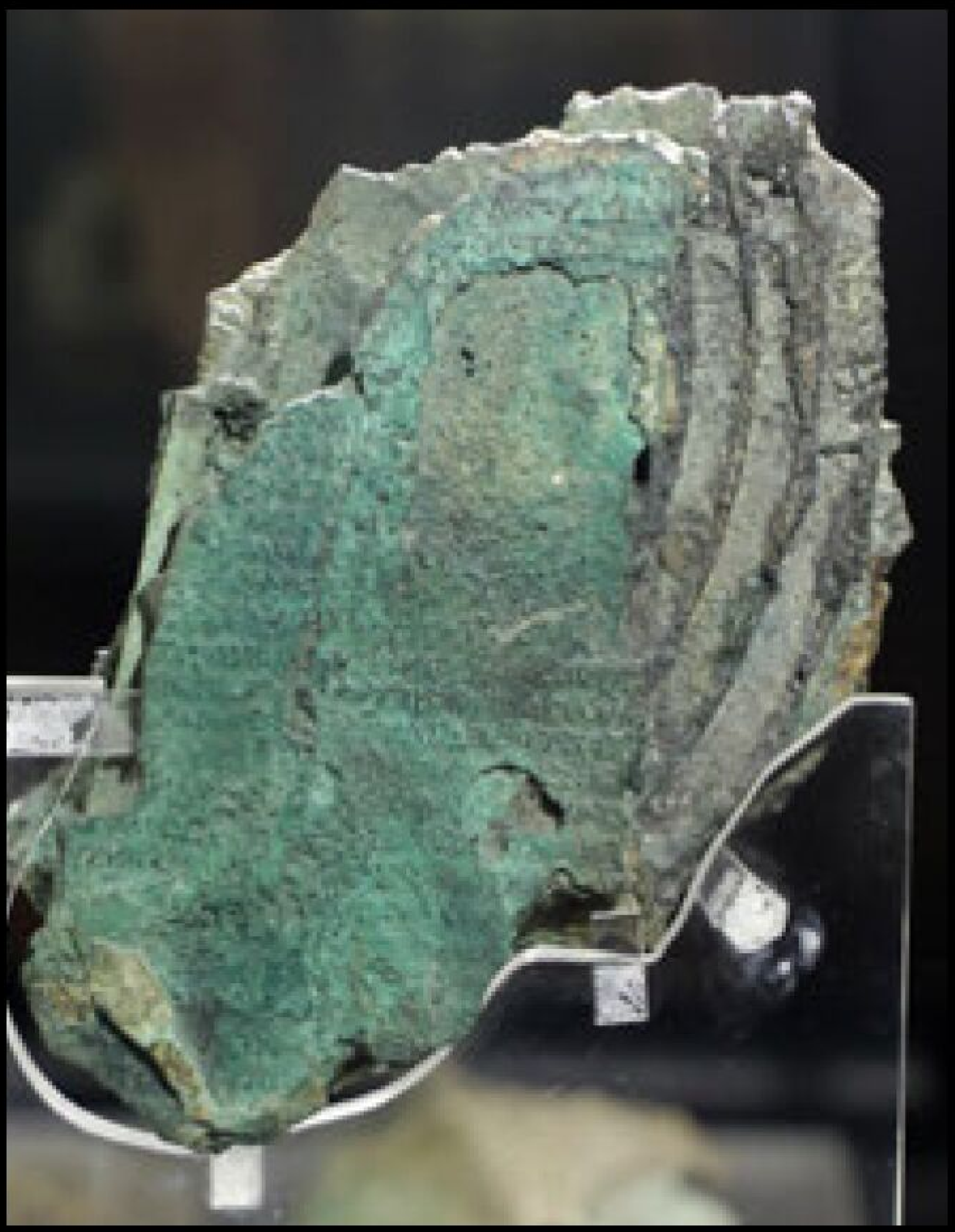
celestial cycles with a precision that rivals modern clocks. This wasn’t a toy; it was a tool for decoding the cosmos.

A Machine to Map the Stars

So, what did it do? The Antikythera Mechanism was a mechanical calculator for the heavens. Turn its crank, and it simulated the movements of the sun, moon, and planets—perhaps even the five known then: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Its front dial displayed the zodiac and a 365-day Egyptian calendar, adjustable for leap years via a clever pin-and-slot system. Another dial tracked the moon’s phases and its quirky orbit, accounting for its elliptical path with a gear setup that mimicked an epicyclic theory Hipparchus championed.

The back boasted two spiral dials: one for the 19-year Metonic cycle (aligning lunar and solar years) and another for the 76-year Callippic cycle, plus a counter for the four-year Olympiad—Greece’s athletic heartbeat. Most mind-blowing? It predicted solar and lunar eclipses using the 223-month Saros cycle, a Babylonian import refined by Greek math. This wasn’t guesswork; it was a symphony of gears translating complex astronomy into tangible motion.



How did they pull it off? The Greeks married observation with geometry. Gears of varying teeth—some with prime numbers like 53 or 223—encoded ratios derived from celestial periods. The differential gear, a mechanism not seen again until the 14th century, let it calculate the moon’s variable speed. Crafting such precision required tools like lathes and a metallurgical finesse we’re only now piecing together. It’s as if Archimedes himself whispered the blueprints.

Why Build a Cosmic Clock?

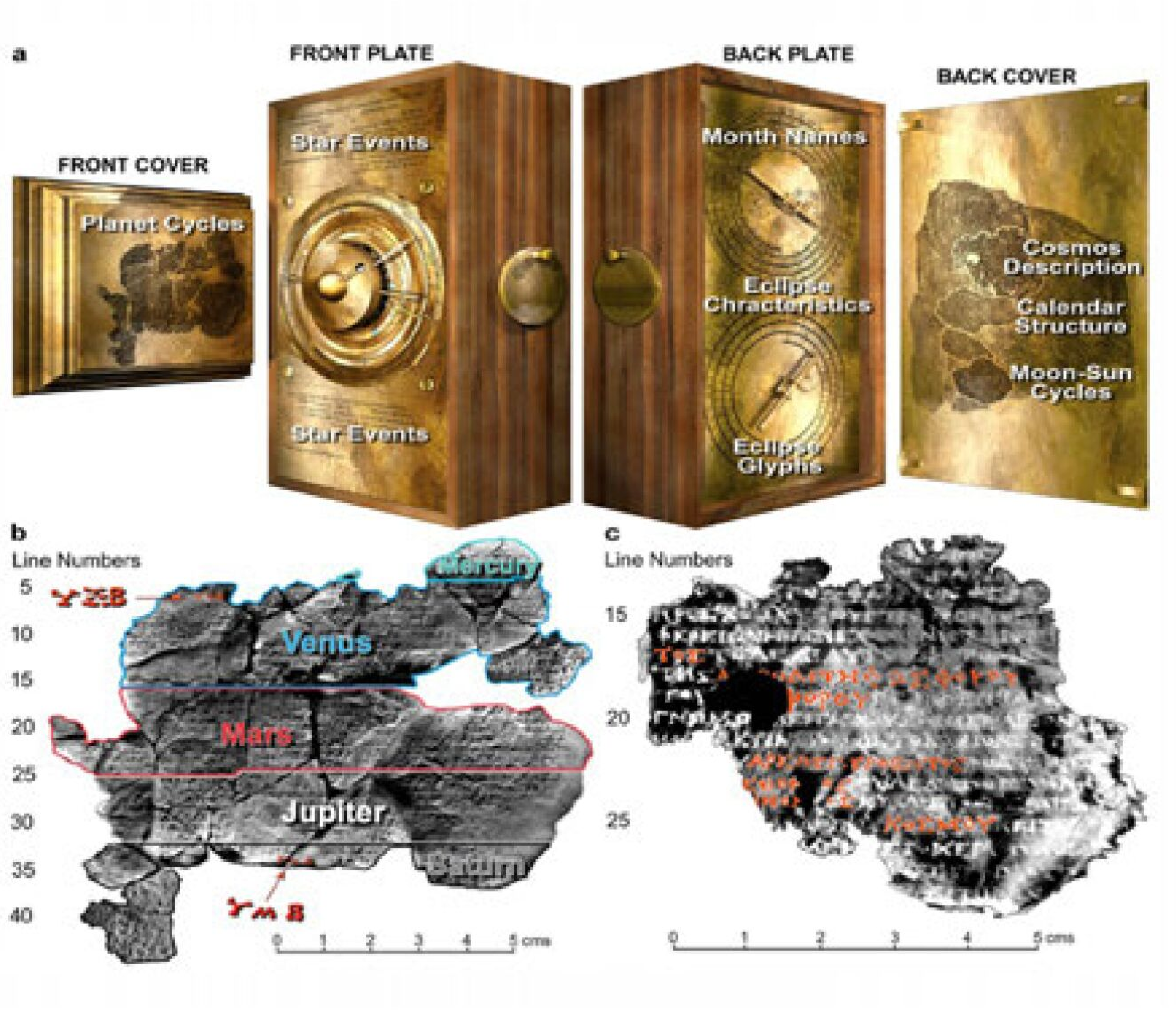
The Mechanism's purpose sparks debate. Was it a teaching tool for philosophers like Posidonius, schooling students in cosmic harmony? A prestige item for wealthy patrons, flaunting Greek brilliance? Or a practical aid for astrologers and navigators, plotting eclipses or auspicious dates? Its shipboard discovery—amid luxury goods bound for Rome—suggests it was a status symbol, perhaps destined for a Roman elite enamoured with Greek culture. Yet its complexity hints at a deeper drive: the Greek obsession with understanding the universe's order, from Plato's celestial spheres to Aristotle's physics.

In a world where gods ruled the skies, this device grounded the divine in mechanics. Imagine a priest or scholar cranking it during a festival, showing an eclipse wasn't chaos but clockwork—a bold statement in an age of superstition. It bridged the abstract and the tangible, making the stars obey human hands.

A Legacy Ahead of Its Time

Nothing like the Antikythera Mechanism appears again for over a thousand years. The Romans admired it but didn't replicate it; medieval Europe lagged far behind. Only with 14th-century clocks do we see comparable gearwork, suggesting the knowledge vanished with Hellenistic decline. Today, it challenges our view of ancient tech—proof the Greeks weren't just dreamers but doers.

For history buffs, the Antikythera Mechanism is a thrilling enigma. It's a window into a lost world where science and wonder are spun together, a bronze echo of a civilization that reached for the stars and caught them in its grasp. ■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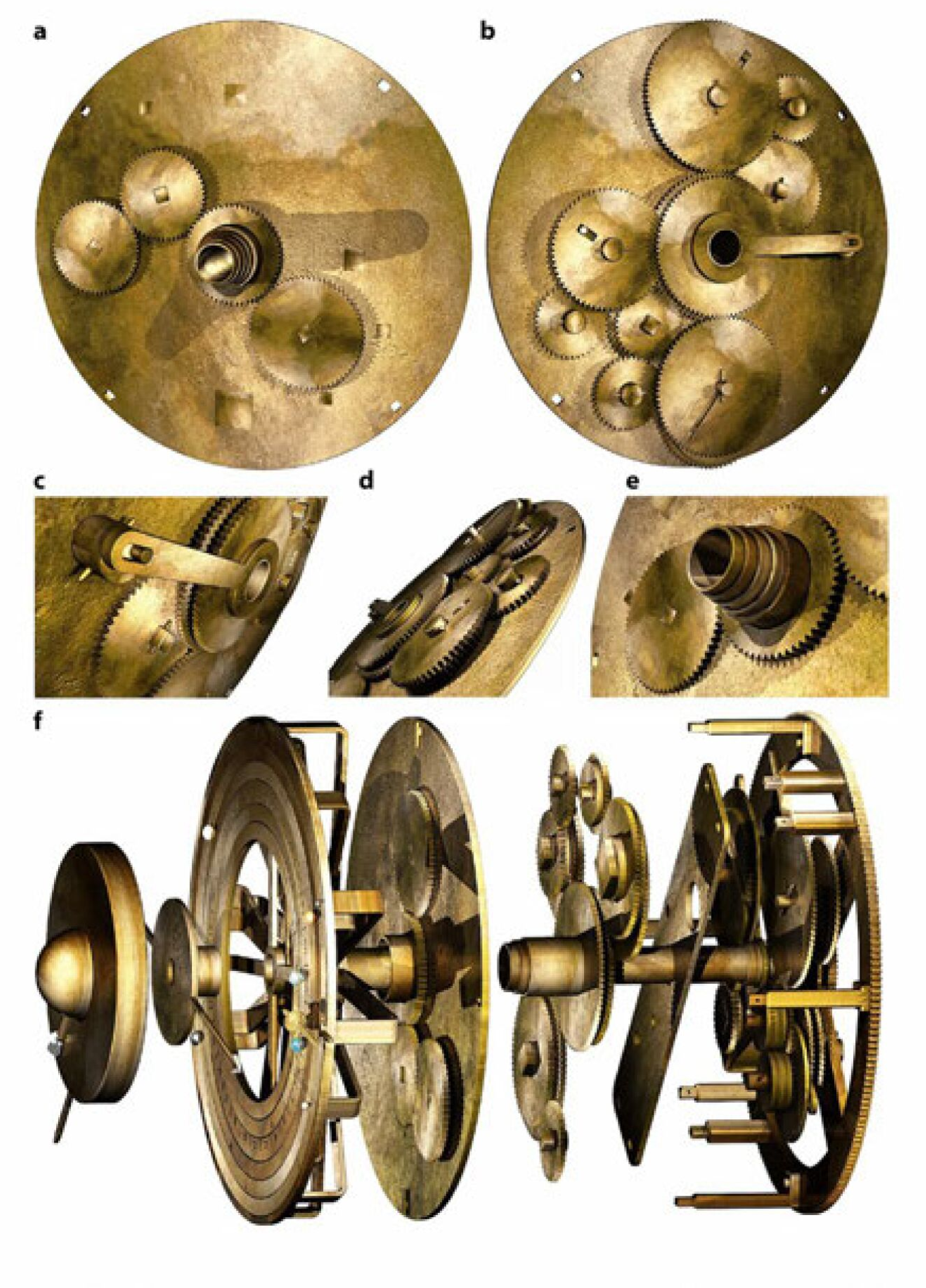

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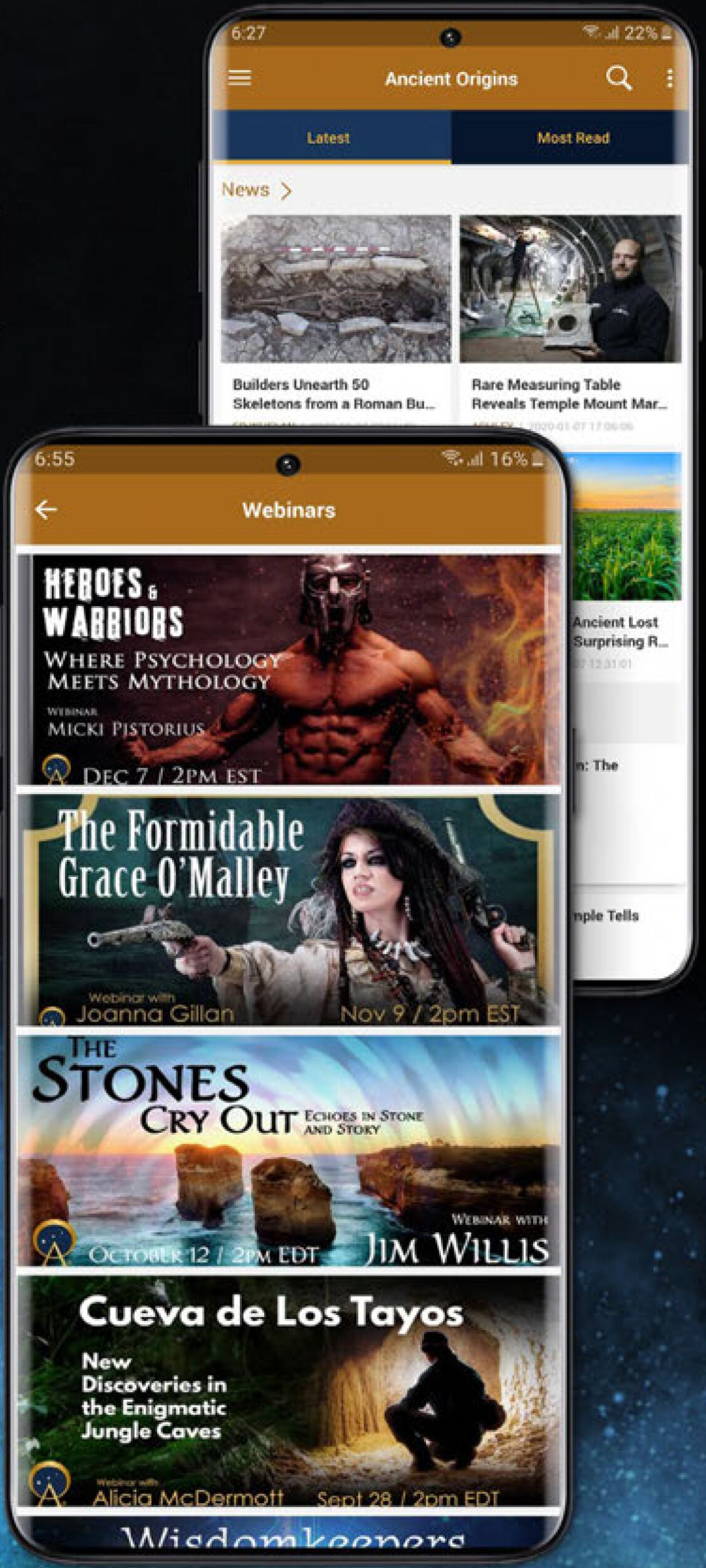

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RISE AND

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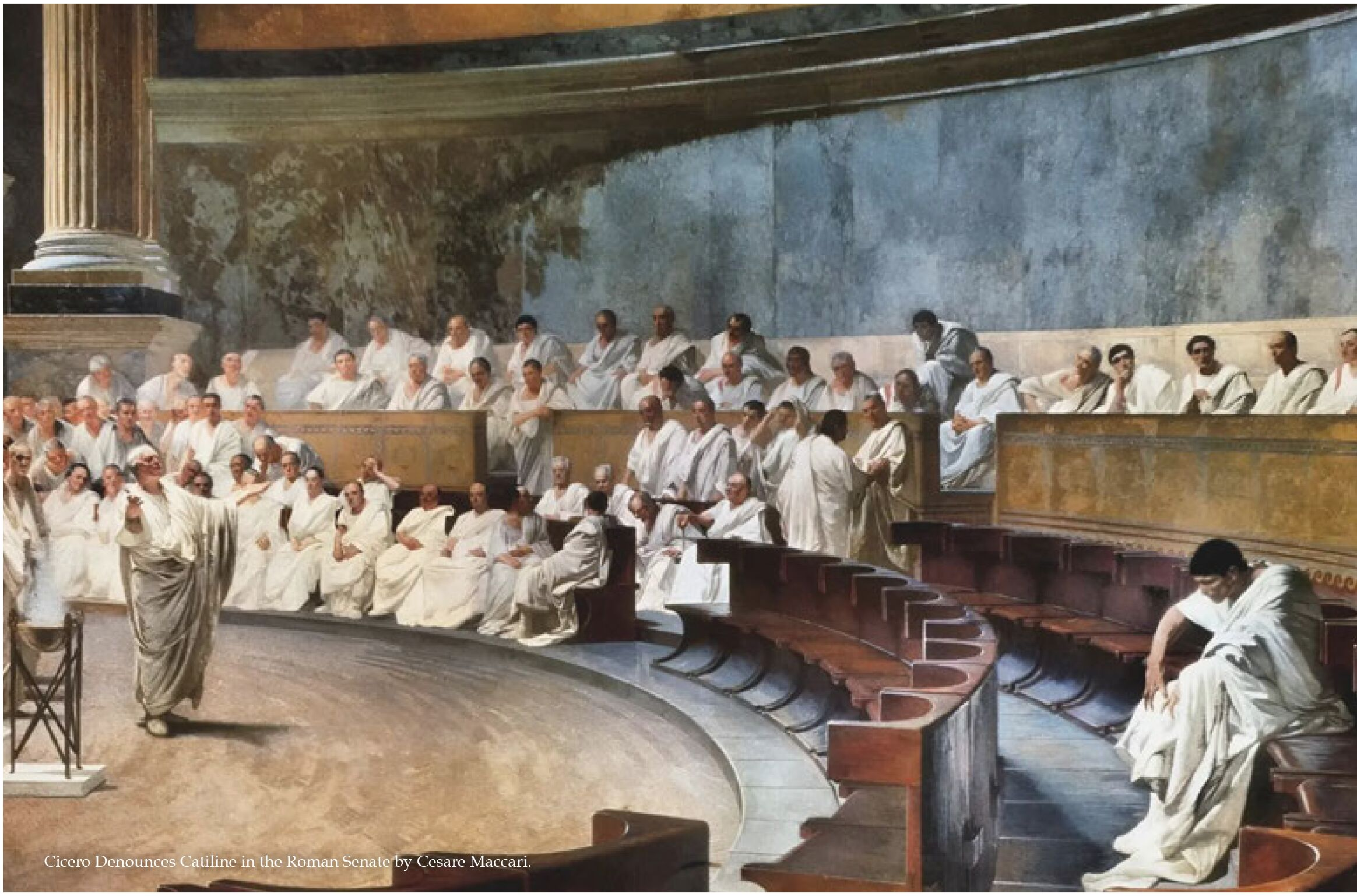

Cicero Denounces Catiline in the Roman Senate by Cesare Maccari.

FALL
EMPIRE

BY IOANNIS SYRIGOS

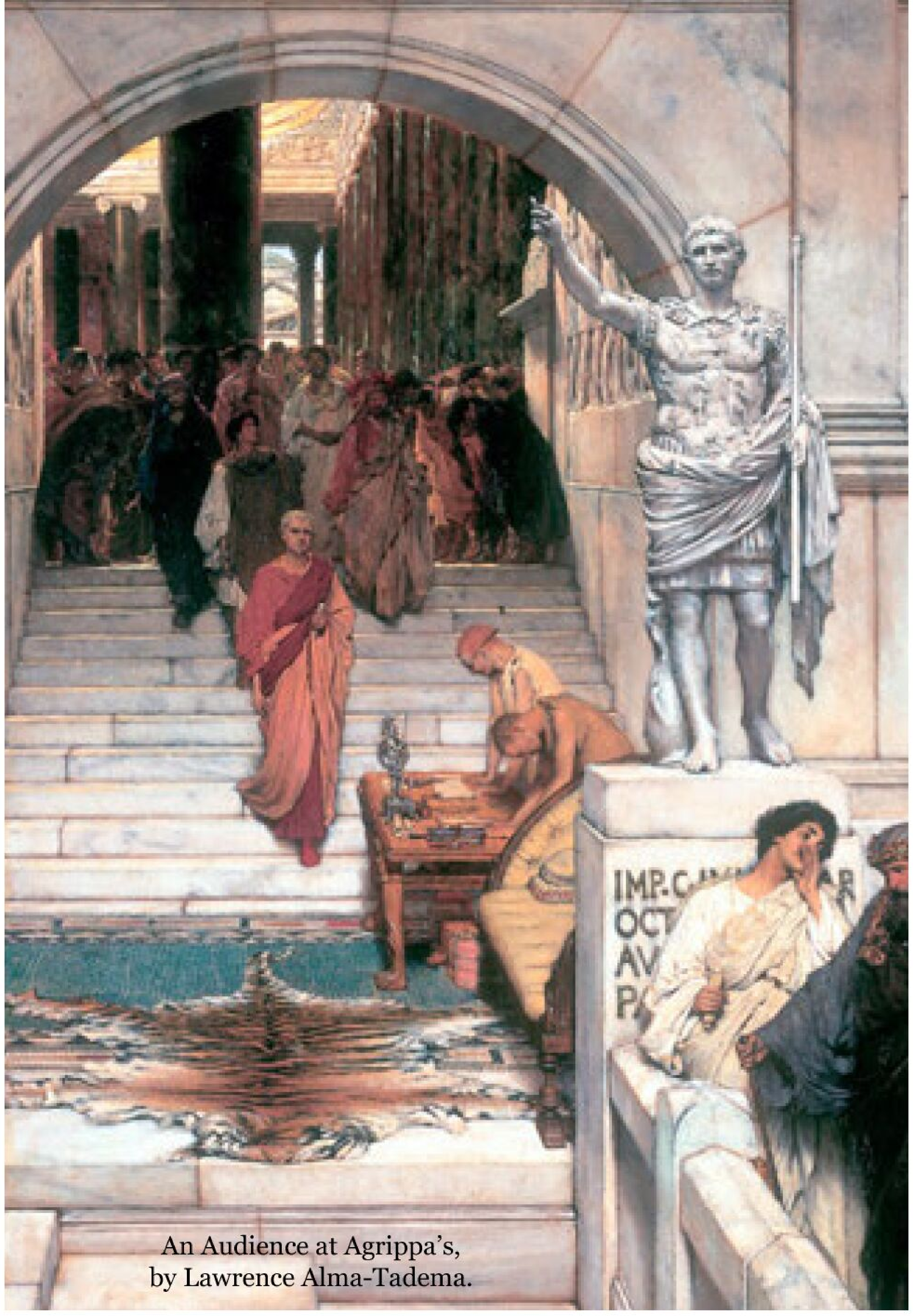
Imagine a scrappy hamlet on the Tiber's muddy banks metastasizing into an empire that would choke the Mediterranean in its grip—a dominion where wine flowed, olives ripened, and power was forged in blood and concrete. The Roman Empire wasn't a fairy tale; it was a relentless machine of conquest, excess, and eventual entropy, its echoes still careening through our world. From gladiatorial slaughter to emperors drunk on divinity, Rome's saga is a study in human audacity—and the inevitable collapse that follows. Here's the unfiltered story of its ascent and implosion.

From Squalor to Supremacy (753 BCE–27 BCE)

Rome's origin myth reads like a gritty script: twin brothers, Romulus and Remus, suckled by a she-wolf, duking it out over a patch of dirt. Romulus kills his sibling in 753 BCE and stamps his name on the place.

Historians remain skeptical—excavations on the Palatine Hill reveal no palaces, just a rough cluster of huts—but the tale fits Rome's ethos: ruthless, pragmatic, and born fighting. These early Romans were no aristocrats; they were hardscrabble survivors, primed to claw their way upward.

By 509 BCE, they'd tired of kings—Tarquin the Proud's tyrannical reign, capped by his son's rape of a noblewoman, sparked a coup. The Roman Republic emerged, less a democracy than an oligarchy of toga-clad power brokers. The Senate held the reins, and it worked—Rome began de-


An Audience at Agrippa's,
by Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

vouring Italy, crushing the Samnites and Etruscans with a mix of steel and strategy. Their trick? Offer the vanquished a choice: citizenship with benefits or annihilation. Most chose the former, fattening Rome's legions with fresh blood.

The Punic Wars against Carthage were the real crucible. Round one (264–241 BCE) saw Rome, a landlubber, reverse-engineer a wrecked Carthaginian ship and bludgeon their way to naval control

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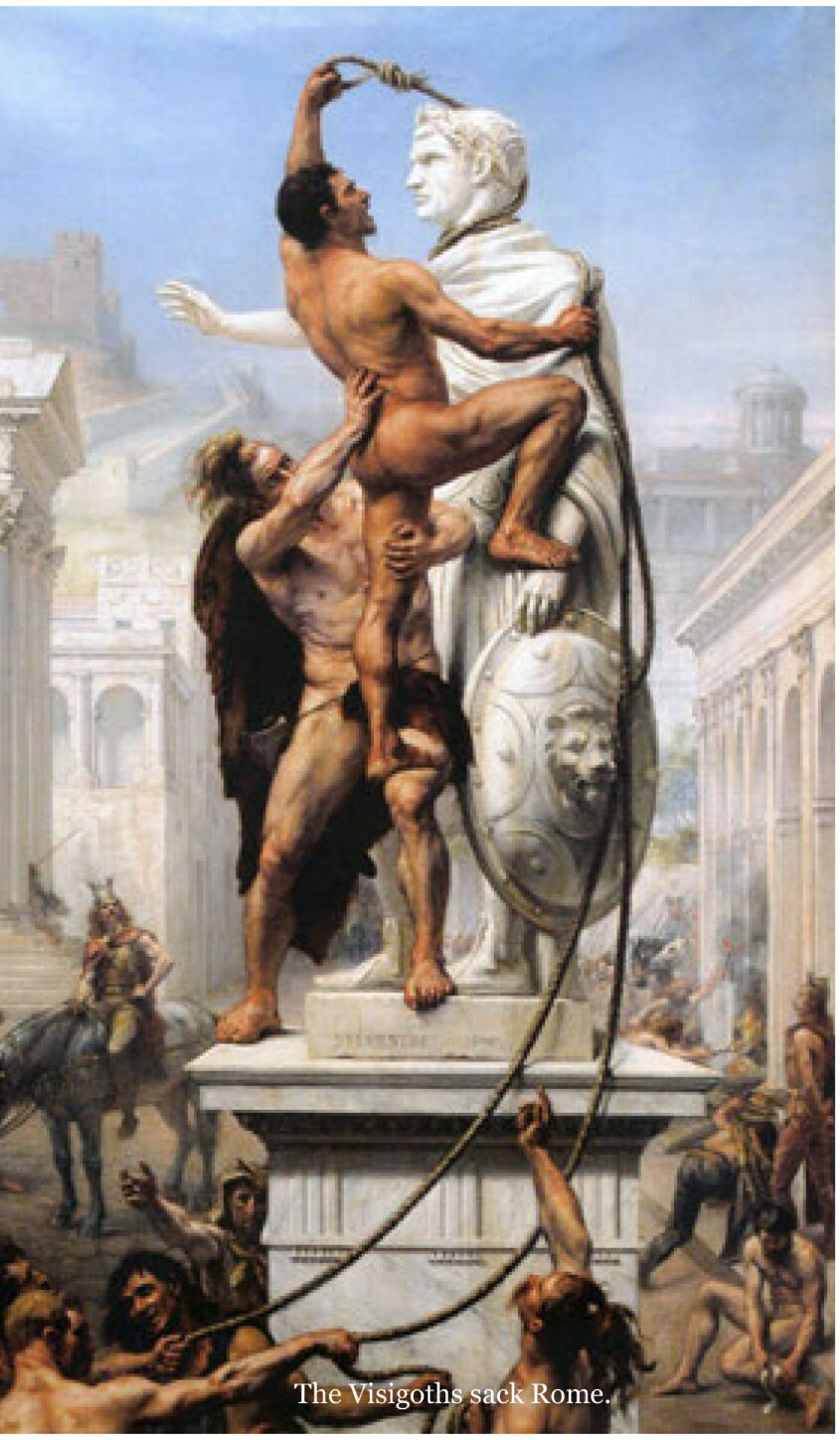

The Visigoths sack Rome.

of Sicily. Round two (218–201 BCE) was Hannibal's masterstroke—elephants lumbering over the Alps, a nightmare of logistics and ballsy genius. He ravaged Italy for years, but Rome's stubbornness and Scipio Africanus' counterstrike in Africa broke him. Round three (149–146 BCE) was spite—Carthage burned, its fields salted, its history obliderated.

With Carthage turned to ash, Rome gorged on Greece and Egypt and then kept going, turning the Mediterranean into their private fiefdom. Wealth and slaves poured in—patricians feasted on exotic delicacies while small farmers lost their plots to sprawling estates.
The Republic buckled under its own girth: corruption festered, the poor seethed, and generals like Julius

RIPPA·L·F·COS·TERTIVM

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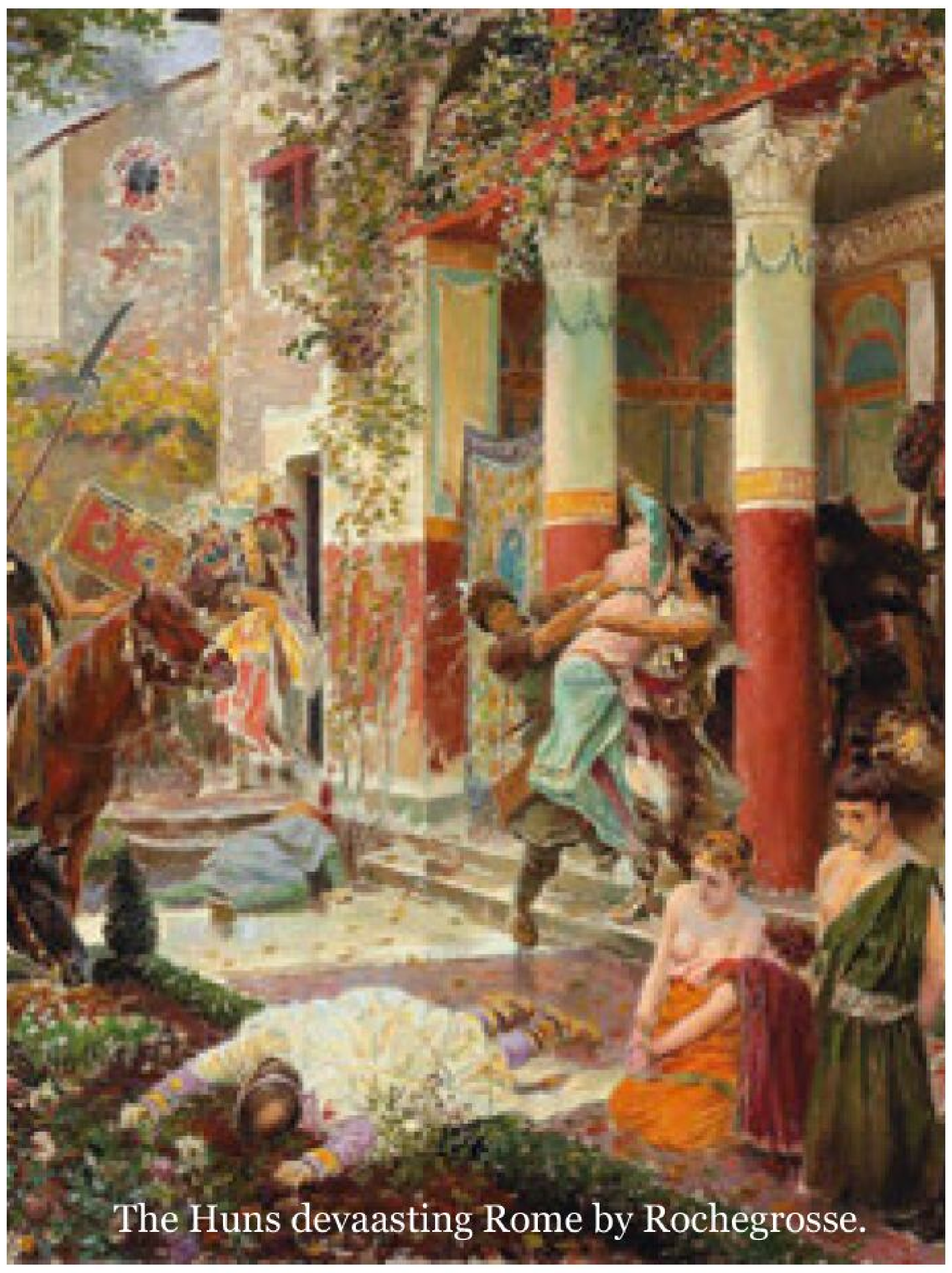
Romans adored garum, a fermented fish sauce so rank it was banned from city limits—think liquid decay with a salty kick.

Caesar smelled opportunity. His crossing of the Rubicon in 49 BCE was a power grab in boots—until 23 daggers ended him in 44 BCE. Octavian, his heir, mopped up the chaos, crowning himself Augustus in 27 BCE. The Republic died; the Empire was born.

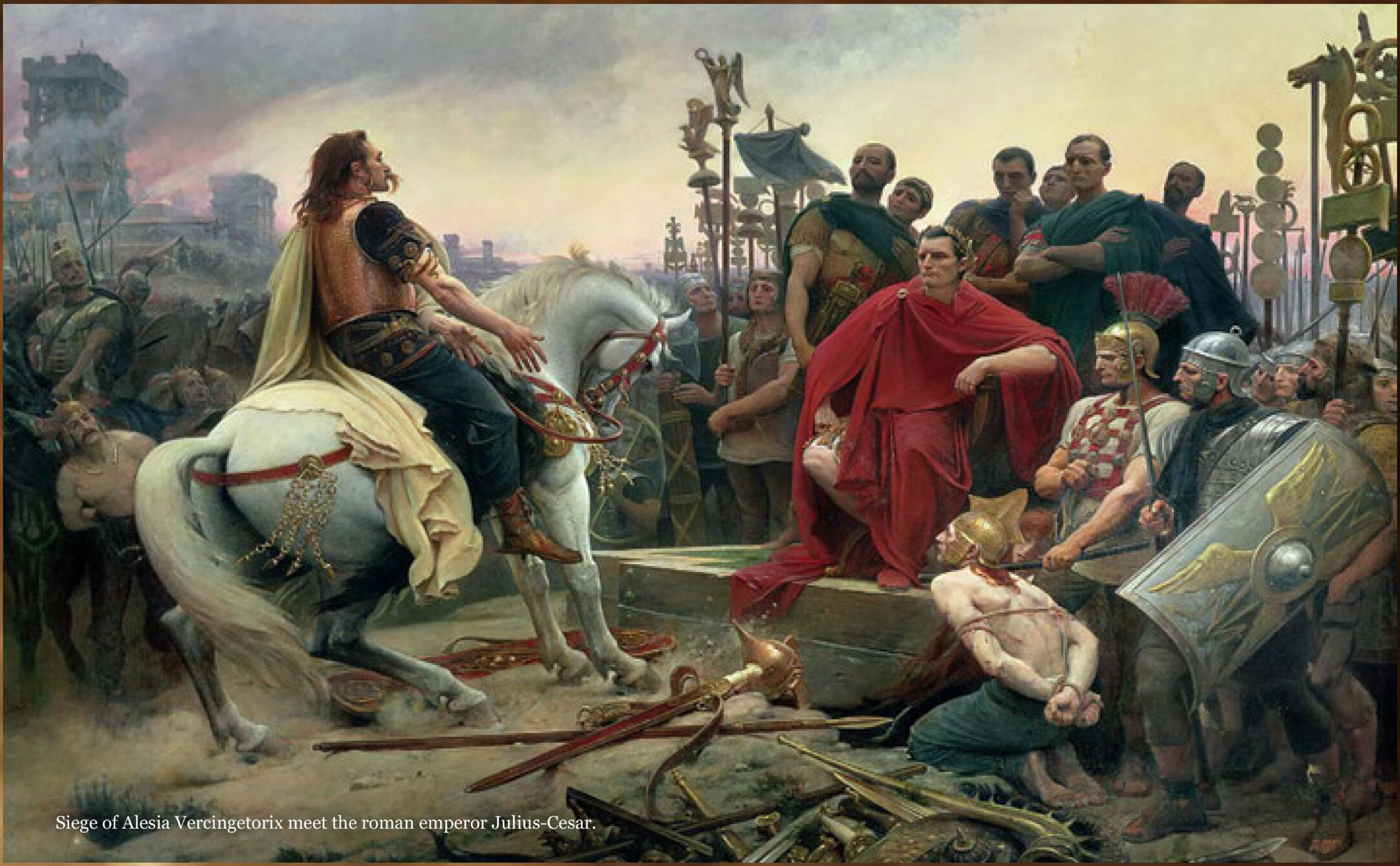
The Pax Romana: Empire at Its Swaggering Peak (27 BCE–180 CE)

Augustus engineered the Pax Romana, two centuries of "peace" marred only by the odd uprising or throat-slitting. He swapped Rome's brick for marble, laced it with roads that still stand, and professionalized the legions. The empire sprawled from Britain's



The Huns devaasting Rome by Rochegrosse.

Robert Paulus/ AdobeStock



Siege of Alesia Vercingetorix meet the roman emperor Julius-Cesar.

mists to Egypt's dunes, 50 million souls under Rome's thumb—a vast, interconnected beast of trade and tribute, with legionaries guzzling vino in Gaul while merchants haggled in Antioch. His successors represented a roulette wheel of competence. Tiberius brooded efficiently, Caligula's horse-senator story was likely slander, and Nero didn't fiddle during the 64 CE fire—he was too busy blaming Christians. Claudius, a limping introvert, improbably annexed Britain in 43 CE. The "Five Good Emperors" (96–180 CE)—Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius among them—expanded Rome to five million square kilometers, blending conquest with introspection; Aurelius scribbled Stoic musings while skewering barbarians.

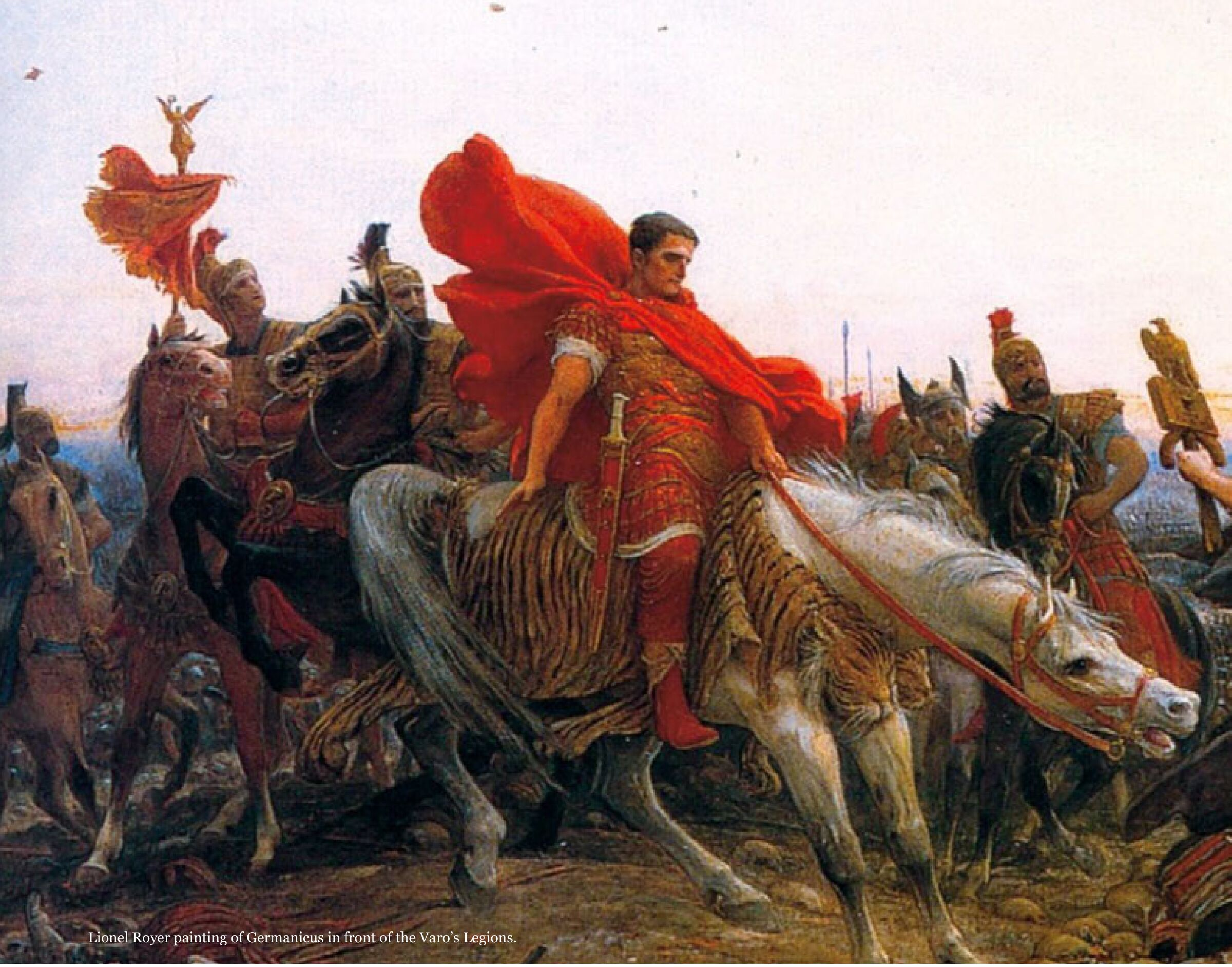
Life pulsed with excess: the Colosseum's 80 CE debut drowned in 100 days of gore—gladiators gutted, beasts butchered. Concrete birthed the Pantheon's enduring dome, Virgil's Aeneid sang of destiny, and aqueducts stretched like arteries. Orgies happened—less than the movies claim—but decadence was real. Christianity crept in, a fringe annoyance until it hijacked the empire later. Beneath the shine, rot brewed: slaves (a third of the populace) propped up an economy too lazy for innovation, elites hoarded wealth, and flops like Commodus—a deluded wannabe Hercules, strangled in 192 CE—exposed the cracks.

Visigoth king Alaric, a Christian, spared Rome's churches in 410 CE—an oddly pious sacking.

The Fall: Decadence to Dust (180 CE–476 CE)

Commodus' demise snapped the golden thread. The third century spiraled into the Crisis of the Third Century (235–284 CE)—26 emperors in 50 years, most knifed by their own men. Civil wars bled the treasury, inflation turned coins to trash, and plagues culled the masses. Goths hammered the north, Sassanids jabbed the east, and Rome's legions frayed, propped up by mercenaries with no loyalty to anyone but themselves.

The Roses of Heliogabalus, painting by Alma Tadema.



Lionel Royer painting of Germanicus in front of the Varo's Legions.

> Urine was a Roman multitasker—ammonia whitened teeth and scrubbed togas, a piss-based economy of hygiene.

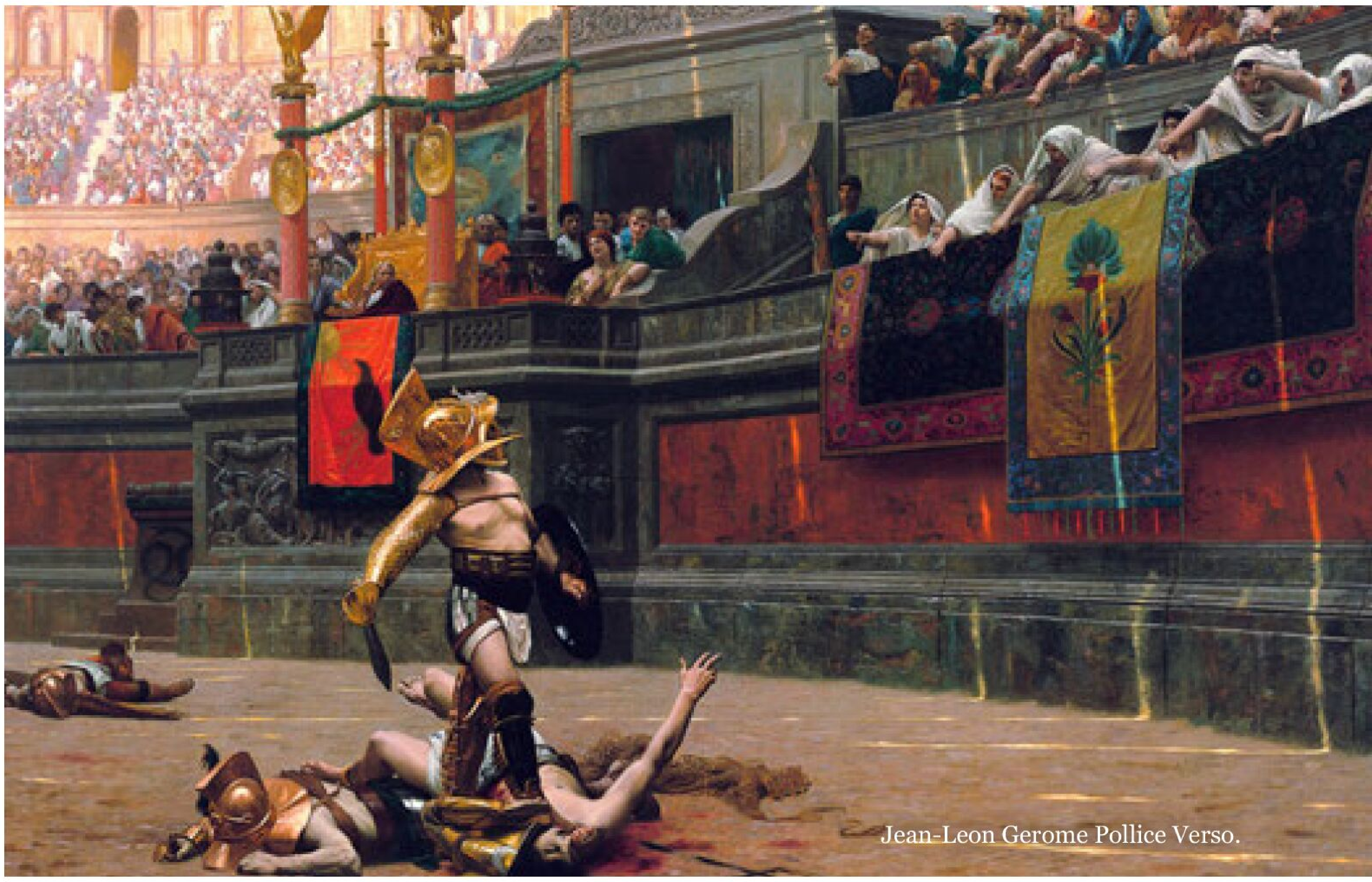
Diocletian (r. 284–305 CE) finally brought things under control, fracturing the empire into a Tetrarchy—four rulers, one mess—to tame its sprawl. He capped prices, bolstered defenses, and torched Christians for scapegoats. It held—barely. Constantine (r. 306–337 CE) doubled down, riding a vision of a cross to victory and legitimizing Christianity in 313 CE. His new eastern capital, Constantinople, left Rome itself a backwater.

The West drew the losing hand—sparse cities, thin coffers, barbarian magnets. In 376 CE, Visigoths fleeing Hunnic hordes begged asylum; Rome's neglect turned them hostile. They sacked the city in 410 CE, a gut punch after 800 years of inviolability. Vandals snatched North Africa in 439 CE, choking off grain. Emperors became figureheads, Germanic warlords the real muscle. In 476 CE, Odoacer deposed Romulus Augustulus—last Western emperor, a poetic footnote—and the West faded, its husk

left to scavengers. Meanwhile, in the East, Byzantium limped on for a millennium.

Why Rome Still Matters

Rome's rise was a brutal ballet of resilience and opportunism, its fall a slow bleed of hubris and neglect. It built roads we still tread, seeded languages we speak, and created a form of governance we mimic. Its legacy haunts our courthouses, cathedrals, and the very notion of empire. When you flick a coin into a fountain or curse a pothole, you're brushing up against the ghost of Rome—a testament to glory's cost and collapse's inevitability. ■



Jean-Leon Gerome Pollice Verso.

Rome's Fetid Fetish:
GARUM
and the Empire's Gamy Soul

Picture a Roman banquet: platters of roasted peacock, dormice glazed in honey, and olives glistening with oil, all laid out under the flicker of oil lamps. Then, the pièce de résistance hits—a stench so potent it could stagger a legionary mid-charge.

This is garum, the Roman Empire's culinary darling, a fermented fish sauce that reeks of a wharf-side massacre yet delivers a salty, savory jolt to the palate. More than a condiment, garum was a pungent obsession, a window into the unapologetic excess of a civilization that ruled with iron and appetite.

Making garum was a study in controlled rot. Romans took fish—anchovies, mackerel, anything hapless enough to be netted—gutted them, and tossed the innards with salt into clay amphorae. Left to fester in the Mediterranean sun for weeks, sometimes months, the mixture stewed as bacteria broke it down into a viscous, amber elixir. The elite prized garum sociorum from Spain, a vintage so costly it outpriced a soldier's annual wage. The masses settled for liquamen, a gritty brew of scraps and offal. The stink was infernal—production sites were often exiled beyond city walls, sparing urban noses the olfactory assault of a fish-gut landfill.

Why this devotion to a sauce that smelled like Poseidon's revenge? It was the flavor. Garum punched up everything—bread, game, greens, even watered-down wine—with a briny depth that prefigured MSG or aged soy. In a world without iceboxes, it was a preservation hack and a status flex. Patricians flaunted their imported batches like rare vintages, while cooks like Apicius, Rome's gastronomic chronicler, drenched recipes in it—think patina de apua, a fishy custard of eggs and garum that sounds dubious but likely seduced the tongue. Physicians even peddled it as a cure-all, swearing

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it banished ulcers or soothed rabid bites, assuming you could choke it down without gagging.

Garum's reach spanned the empire, from Britain's damp outposts to the sands of Egypt. Archaeologists unearth amphorae branded with garum labels, relics of a thriving trade network; shipwrecks off Italy's coast cradle sunken jars, testaments to Rome's insatiable hunger. In Pompeii, frozen by Vesuvius in 79 CE, garum vats linger amid the ash—a silent whiff of a lost world's priorities.

Garum's allure mirrors Rome itself: audacious, pragmatic, and teetering on deranged. This was a culture that tamed continents yet bowed to a sauce that could clear a room. Its echoes persist in Southeast Asia's fish sauces—Vietnam's nuoc mam owes it a nod—but Rome's embrace was uniquely visceral.

So next time you reach for hot sauce, consider the Romans: they'd be slathering garum on their dormice, smirking through the funk, reveling in a decadence we can only sniff at from afar. ■

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Japan's Heian Period

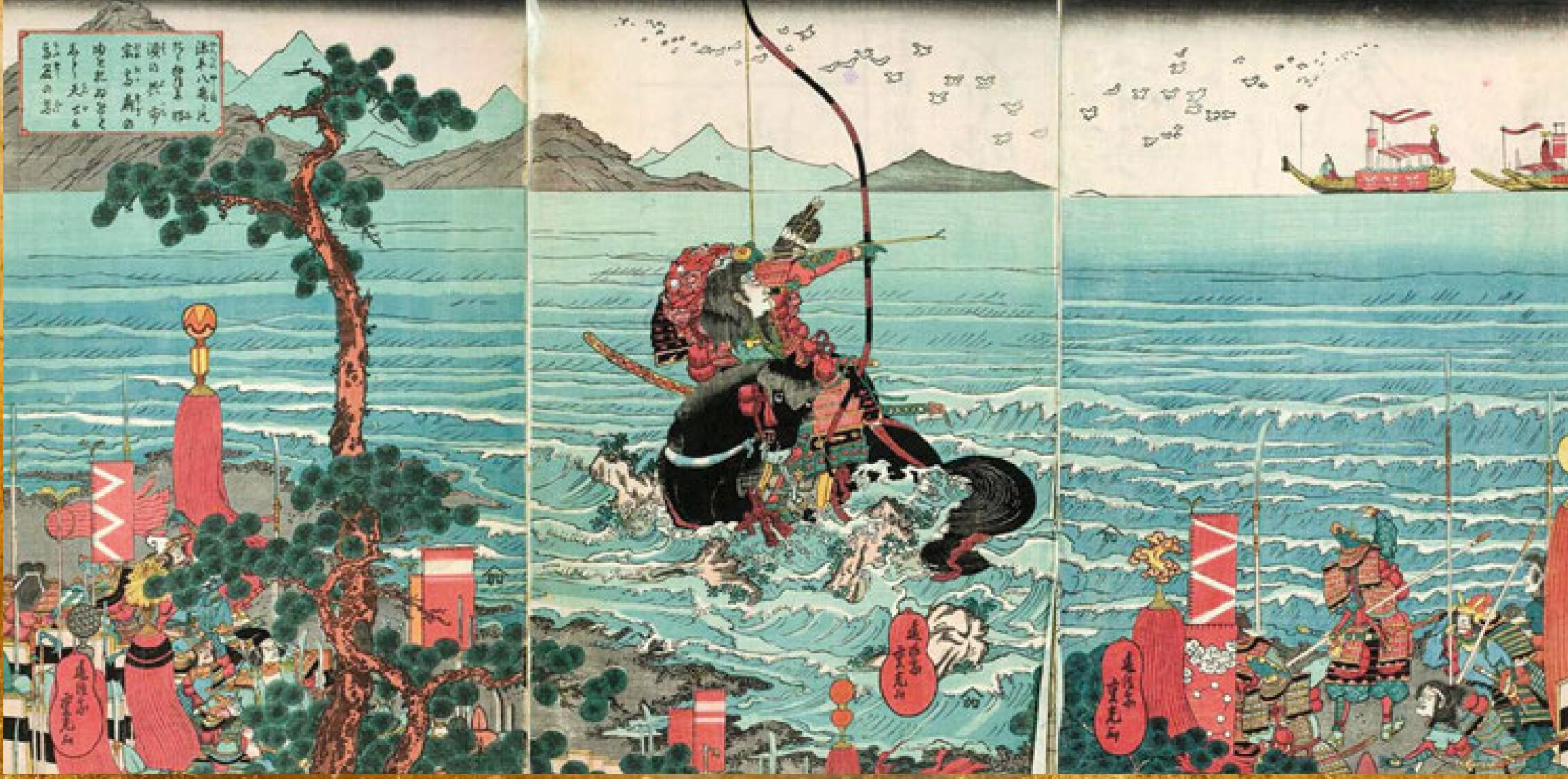
A Golden Age of Culture and Transformation, Doomed in the End

BY NATHAN FALDE

Japan's history is marked by distinct periods, most of which lasted for centuries and each of which shaped the nation's cultural and political evolution. Among these, the Heian Period (794–1185 AD) was an especially notable era, as it ushered in a golden age of Japanese art, literature, and governance. Gone for nearly a thousand years, its remnants still resonate through the country's rich culture. In 794 AD, following decades of internal strife, Emperor Kammu relocated Japan's capital from Nara to Heian-kyo (present-day Kyoto), in an effort to weaken the political influence of Buddhist monasteries that had grown powerful in Nara. This move symbolized a fresh start for the imperial court and allowed for a more centralized system of governance.

Lila Patel / AdobeStock

While the emperor held symbolic authority, real power often lay in the hands of court aristocrats. Among them, the Fujiwara clan rose to dominance through a calculated strategy of intermarrying with the imperial family. Originally, Heian governance followed the Chinese model. However, as the Heian period progressed, Japan began to distance itself from Chinese administrative models, creating a distinctly Japanese political and cultural identity that fostered pride and a sense of common purpose (among the society's elites, primarily, as the masses remain powerless peasants).



Economic Shifts and the Rise of the Samurai

The Heian period was characterized by a rigid social hierarchy. At the top were the emperor and court aristocracy, with the Fujiwara clan universally recognized as the period's most influential family. Below them were mid-ranking officials, provincial landowners, and military elites, while commoners and laborers formed the lower tiers. Though social mobility was rare, Buddhist monasteries sometimes offered a path for those of lower birth to rise in status through religious or clerical roles.

One of the most significant economic developments during the Heian Period was the rise of the shōen system, under which the wealthiest landowners were exempted from taxation even as their estates continued to grow larger. These estates were controlled by noble families, temples, and military leaders, and the growing autonomy among regional landowners weakened central authority and contributed to the emergence of a new class of warriors: the samurai.

Initially, samurai were employed as private guards for noble families. But as their influence grew, they began to function as regional governors and military leaders themselves, representing a new elite rising to compete for statues with the old aristocracy.

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Innovations in Literature, Art, and Architecture

While burgeoning elite rivalries and resentments created a tenuous political stability, the Heian period was a time of immense cultural achievement, unprecedented in the Japanese context and entirely homegrown.

A defining aspect of Heian culture was its literary brilliance, largely fueled by the widespread use of hiragana, a phonetic script that allowed for more fluid and expressive writing. Unlike the more rigid Chinese characters, hiragana gave Japanese authors the freedom to compose intricate narratives that reflected court life and personal emotions with unprecedented depth.

The Heian period also witnessed a flourishing of visual arts, with painting, calligraphy, and religious iconography reaching new heights of creativity and imagination. Inspired by Buddhist themes, artists created intricate paintings that adorned temples and noble residences. One of the most distinctive art forms to emerge was emakimono, which were illustrated narrative scrolls that combined painting and calligraphy to tell engaging stories.

Architecture also evolved during this period. While early Heian structures borrowed heavily from the Chinese Tang Dynasty, they gradually developed more indigenous features. The design of Kyoto, Japan's capital at the time, reflected Chinese influence, yet buildings incorporated adaptations suited to Japan's climate and aesthetic sensibilities. The Byodo-in temple, particularly its Phoenix Hall, remains a prime example of Heian-era architectural extravagence, blending structural elegance with spiritual significance.

The Evolution of Buddhism and Shinto

The Heian period was also marked by significant religious shifts, as new Buddhist schools emerged and spiritual practices evolved. Two of the most influential Buddhist sects introduced during this time were Tendai and Shingon, founded by monks Saicho and Kukai, respectively. These sects brought esoteric teachings from China and emphasized complex rituals, sacred texts, and meditative practices.

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Tendai Buddhism promoted a broad, inclusive approach to enlightenment, whereas Shingon Buddhism focused on mystical elements, including mantras and symbolic imagery.

Meanwhile, Shinto, Japan's indigenous belief system, remained deeply interwoven with daily life. Rather than existing as a formalized religion, Shinto was a collection of local and clan-based spiritual traditions that revered kami, or nature spirits.

The interplay between Shinto and Buddhism led to Shinbutsu-shūgō, a unique fusion where Buddhist temples housed Shinto shrines and vice versa. This synthesis of spiritual visions influenced cultural development quite profoundly, as art, architecture, and literature all came to reflect Japan's singular spiritual orientation, while functioning as unifying force.

The Decline of the Heian Culture

The cultural and creative achievements of the Heian period are unmatched in Japanese history. They provided the country's elites in particular with meaning and purpose, and a rationale for preserving the system despite the tensions generated by the competition among elites for more power and influence. But this situation couldn't last forever; as historyhas shown time and time again, time is the enemy that eventually defeats all empires.

As military families and regional warlords grew more and more powerful in the later Heian

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period, the imperial court became more and more vulnerable. Ultimately, the concentration of so much wealth in private hands destabilized the state to the point where its downfall and dissolution were all but inevitable.

The Fujiwara clan, once the dominant political force in the Heian court, saw its grip on power weaken due to internal divisions, succession disputes, and external resistance. As the imperial family struggled to maintain authority over a fracturing elite class, warrior clans such as the Taira and Minamoto gained power and prominence, challenging the court's dominance at a time when its vulnerability was acute.

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Tensions between the Taira and Minamoto factions culminated in the Genpei War (1180–1185), a brutal conflict that sealed the fate of the Heian period culture. The Minamoto clan triumphed, and in 1192 Minamoto no Yoritomo was appointed shogun, establishing the Kamakura Shogunate. This marked the official end of the Heian period and the beginning of Japan's feudal era, where military rule replaced aristocratic governance.

A Casualty of History, and Its Own Weaknesses

Though the Heian period eventually gave way to samurai rule, its cultural and artistic contributions left a lasting legacy, one that was appreciated by all

subsequent eras. The literature, visual arts, and architectural achievements of this period continue to be celebrated as defining elements of Japanese heritage, and with good cause. Kyoto, once the heart of the Heian world, hosts ancient temples, shrines, and historical landmarks that remind everyone of Japan's gone-but-not-forgotten Golden Age.

The Heian period is remembered (rightly) as a time of unparalleled cultural refinement and artistic brilliance. But as often happens with great civilizations, too much of the Heian period's brilliance was channeled into creative and cultural endeavors. This left greedy mediocrities from increasingly feckless and dissolute aristocratic families in charge of the empire, as their ruthlessly ambitious and utterly self-centered rivals from the samurai and landowning classes plotted their downfall.

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In the end, the Heian cultures incredible creativity and imagination couldn't save it from decline and destruction. Its most gifted people were not in a position to act as a counterweight to the factions that arose to finally tear the Heian world asunder, after literally centuries of unity and incredible productivity.

Over the course of thousands of years, many civilizations rose and fell in Japan, a pattern replicated even in the modern age (the rising Japanese economy was the envy of the world in the late 1970s and 1980s, but now not so much). The Heian period civilization was exceptionally productive in the realms of arts and culture, but that didn't prevent it from eventually collapsing under the weight of an inherently unstable political structure, one that pitted elites against elites while disenfranchising the masses who had no reason to choose one side over the others (which could have put an end to the fighting and saved the Heian culture from extinction). ■

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GENGHIS
and the
The Mongol Empire That Changed the World

The Mongol Empire is one of the most remarkable and influential empires in world history. At its height in the 13th and 14th centuries, it was the largest contiguous empire ever established, stretching from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Under the leadership of Genghis Khan and his successors, the Mongols forged an empire that reshaped global trade, warfare, and, surprisingly, diplomacy. Their military innovations and adaptability allowed them to conquer vast territories at an unprecedented speed. Yet, despite its meteoric rise, the Mongol Empire ultimately fragmented and declined after a relatively short duration.

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KHAN

Storm from the East

BY GARY MANNERS

How did the Mongol Empire rise so swiftly to dominance? How did its influence change Eurasia? What factors contributed to its eventual decline? By examining the empire's military strategies, structures for government, and economic policies, alongside the challenges it faced—such as internal divisions, overextension, and changing political landscapes— let's unravel the story of the Mongol Empire.

The Man Who Started it All, Genghis Khan

Born between 1155 and 1167 (often stated as around 1162) on the harsh steppes of Mongolia, Temüjin, who would later become known as Genghis Khan, faced immense struggles from an early age. His father, Yesügei, was a minor chieftain who was poisoned by rival Tatars when Temüjin was still a child. This left his family vulnerable, and they were soon abandoned by their own tribe, forcing them to survive in extreme poverty.

Despite, or perhaps because of these hardships, Temüjin displayed remarkable leadership abilities. Through a combination of personal charisma, strategic alliances, and ruthless determination, he gradually united the disparate Mongol clans. He established a meritocratic system that rewarded loyalty and ability rather than noble birth, allowing talented warriors from all backgrounds to rise through the ranks. By 1206, he had consolidated his rule and was declared "Genghis Khan", meaning "Universal Ruler," marking the birth of the Mongol Empire.

One of the key factors behind the Mongol Empire's meteoric rise was innovation in its military strategies,

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initially coming from Genghis's scheming mind.

Mongol armies were highly mobile, utilizing swift and disciplined cavalry units to outmaneuver opponents. Their skilled horsemanship, along with the use of composite bows, capable of piercing armor from a great distance, gave them a significant advantage. Clever tactics, including feigned retreats to lure enemies into ambushes, were another hallmark of their battle style.

Genghis Khan first turned his attention to China, defeating the Jin Dynasty in northern China (1211–1234). Here, the Mongols adapted siege warfare tactics, and even incorporated Chinese engineers and technology to attack walled cities.

In 1219, he launched a campaign against the Khwarazmian Empire in Persia after its ruler, Ala ad-Din Muhammad, executed Mongol envoys. This retaliation from Genghis was a devastating invasion, razing cities and annihilating entire populations.

His forces then pushed further into Central Asia, Persia, and parts of Russia, establishing Mongol dominance over vast territories. The speed, adaptability, and sheer brutality of the Mongol conquests made them an unstoppable force in the 13th century.

Establishment of an Empire

Looking beyond his military success, Genghis Khan laid the foundation for a vast and efficient empire. He implemented administrative reforms that ensured stability and prosperity across his domains. Religious tolerance was a cornerstone of Mongol

rule, allowing conquered peoples to practice their faiths freely. Trade flourished under Mongol protection, with the empire facilitating the movement of goods, ideas, and technology along the Silk Road.

To maintain order, Genghis Khan codified laws under the Yassa, a legal system that emphasized discipline, loyalty, and justice. This helped unify his diverse empire and establish a sense of Mongol identity. All these elements contributed to the immense initial success of the empire.

Genghis Khan allegedly died in August 1227, at the approximate age of 65, leaving behind what was already one of the largest empires in history. His successors, beginning with his son Ögedei, continued his expansionist approach, further cementing Mongol dominance and ushering in the era of the Pax Mongolica, a period of relative peace that enabled unprecedented cultural and economic exchanges between East and West.

Genghis was undoubtedly a controversial character, being generous and loyal to his supporters, but ruthless with his enemies. It was certainly advisable to be on his right side if possible.

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The Mongol Empire at Its Height

Following Genghis Khan's death in 1227, his successors continued to expand the Mongol Empire. His third son, Ögedei Khan (ruling 1229–1241), was elected Great Khan and oversaw conquests that solidified Mongol dominance across Eurasia. He directed campaigns against the Jin Dynasty in China, finally crushing them in 1234, and launched invasions into Persia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

One of the most ambitious campaigns under Ögedei was the Mongol invasion of Eastern Europe (1236–1241). Led by the brilliant general Subotai, Mongol forces devastated Russia, Poland, and Hungary, using their swift cavalry tactics and psychological warfare to overcome the unwitting

enemy armies. This invasion established the Golden Horde, a Mongol khanate that would dominate the Russian steppes for centuries. The only reason Western Europe was spared further destruction was Ögedei's sudden death in 1241, which forced the Mongols to withdraw to elect a new Great Khan. Later, Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan, completed the conquest of China and established the Yuan Dynasty in 1271, which was the ruling force until 1368. Kublai moved the Mongol capital to Beijing and adopted Chinese administrative practices, blending Mongol and Chinese governance to solidify control.

Kublai's reign marked a peak in Mongol power, as he not only ruled China but also maintained influence over much of Central Asia, Persia, and Russia.

Pax Mongolica, the Coming of Peace

Despite the Mongols' reputation for military brutality, they were also skilled administrators who fostered stability and economic prosperity across their empire. The Pax Mongolica, or "Mongol Peace," was a period of relative stability that allowed trade, travel, and cultural exchange to flourish across Eurasia. The Mongols revitalized the Silk Road, providing protection for merchants and travelers, which encouraged the movement of goods, technologies, and ideas between China, the Middle East, and Europe.

Mongol governance was highly pragmatic, integrating diverse cultures and talents into their administration.

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Domingo/ AdobeStock

They employed Persian, Chinese, and Turkic officials in their bureaucracy and promoted religious tolerance, allowing Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and others to practice freely. This open approach not only maintained stability but had the knock-on effect of encouraging the blending of artistic, scientific, and technological advancements. The Mongols introduced paper money in Persia and China, improved postal relay systems, and facilitated the spread of innovations such as gunpowder and printing to the West.

In this way, their influence on world history was profound. The Mongol Empire connected distant civilizations in an unprecedented way, laying the groundwork for the later Age of Exploration. European travelers like Marco Polo brought back accounts of Mongol governance and Chinese technology, sparking curiosity and trade ambitions in Europe. While the Mongol Empire eventually fragmented, its legacy of creating global connections, spreading technology, and shaping economic and political systems endured for centuries.

Divided We Fall

By the end of 13th century, the once-unified Mongol Empire had fragmented into four major khanates, each ruled semi-independently by different branches of Genghis Khan's descendants. These divisions marked the beginning of the empire's decline, as internal strife and power struggles weakened Mongol unity.

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The Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) in China, established by Kublai Khan, was the most prominent Mongol-ruled state, but it struggled to maintain control over the vast and populous Chinese territory. In Central Asia, the Chagatai Khanate governed much of the Mongol heartland, but it faced constant turmoil due to conflicts between traditional nomadic Mongols and the increasingly Islamicized local elites.

The Ilkhanate (1256–1335), ruling over Persia and the Middle East, initially flourished under leaders like Ghazan Khan, who converted to Islam and integrated Persian administrative practices. However, after the death of Abu Sa'id in 1335, the Ilkhanate fell into chaos, with rival factions vying for power.

Meanwhile, the Golden Horde (1240s–1502), which controlled Russia and parts of Eastern Europe, remained a dominant force for a time but suffered from internal conflicts and the gradual rise of Russian principalities, particularly the Grand Duchy of Moscow.

Civil wars between Mongol factions became increasingly common, draining resources and making the khanates vulnerable to external threats.

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For example, the Toluid Civil War (1260–1264), fought between the descendants of Genghis Khan for control of the empire was significant in the split of the nation. After the death of Möngke Khan in 1259, two of his brothers - Ariq Böke and Kublai Khan - clashed over the title of Great Khan. Ariq Böke, representing the traditional Mongol aristocracy, was proclaimed Great Khan in Karakorum, the Mongol heartland, while Kublai, who had stronger ties to the Chinese and Persian administrative systems, declared himself ruler in northern China. The conflict escalated into a full-scale war, with Kublai gradually gaining the upper hand.

By 1264, Ariq Böke surrendered, and Kublai officially became the Great Khan, establishing the Yuan Dynasty in China. However, the war deepened divisions within the empire, weakening Mongol unity and accelerating the fragmentation of the khanates, as rulers in the Chagatai Khanate, the Golden Horde, and the Ilkhanate increasingly acted independently.

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So, as different branches of the Mongol ruling elite fought over succession and territory, the unity that had once made the Mongol Empire unstoppable was lost, hastening its decline.

Challenges of Overexpansion

The Mongols' vast empire, stretching from the Pacific Ocean to Eastern Europe, became increasingly difficult to govern. The sheer diversity of the peoples and cultures under Mongol rule posed a major challenge. While the Mongols had been relatively tolerant of different religions and customs, local resistance to foreign rule persisted. This was especially true in China, where resentment toward Mongol rulers grew over time, and in Persia, where the ruling Mongols struggled to integrate with the predominantly Muslim population.

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Rebellions and uprisings became more frequent, further straining Mongol military and administrative resources. The Mongols also suffered significant setbacks in military campaigns. Their failed invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281, both thwarted by typhoons (later called “kamikaze” or “divine winds”), revealed the limits of Mongol naval power. Similarly, their attempts to subjugate Southeast Asia, including Vietnam and Java, ended in costly failures, as the tropical climate and guerrilla warfare tactics of local armies proved too difficult to overcome.

These failures, combined with logistical difficulties in maintaining supply lines across the vast empire, led to a weakening of Mongol military dominance. As the Mongols became more settled and integrated into the cultures they ruled, their once-feared nomadic warriors gradually lost their mobility and discipline, making it harder to suppress uprisings and defend their territories.

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External Pressures and Final Collapse

By the 14th century, external pressures further accelerated the decline of Mongol rule. The Yuan Dynasty in China faced increasing resistance from the Han Chinese population, culminating in the rise of the Ming Dynasty in 1368. Led by Zhu Yuanzhang, the Ming forces expelled the Mongols from China, forcing them to retreat to the steppes of Mongolia. This marked the end of Mongol rule in China, a major blow to their empire.

The Ilkhanate in Persia also suffered internal instability, worsened by economic decline and outbreaks of plague. It is proposed (in Weatherford, 2004) that the Black Death, which devastated Europe and the Middle East in the mid-14th century, further weakened Mongol rule, as trade routes once protected by the Mongols became vectors for disease. Without a strong central authority, the Ilkhanate collapsed into fragmented local rule by 1357.

In the west, the Golden Horde gradually lost power due to the rise of Muscovy (the precursor to modern Russia). Ivan III of Moscow, also known as Ivan the Great, successfully resisted Mongol dominance and ultimately ended the "Tatar Yoke" in 1480. Meanwhile, the Central Asian Chagatai Khanate faced destruction at the hands of Timur (Tamerlane), a powerful warlord of Turco-Mongol descent who sought to revive Genghis Khan's empire in his own name.

By the 15th century, the Mongol Empire had fully dissolved. While Mongol khanates persisted in some form, they were no longer the dominant force they had been during the 13th century.

The rise of new powers, including the Ming Dynasty, the Ottoman Empire, and Muscovy, signaled the end of the Mongol era. However, their influence on world history endured, as they had reshaped trade, warfare, and cultural exchange in ways that would echo for centuries.

The Mongols left a lasting legacy in many regions they once controlled, having introduced practices, ideas and technologies that make them worthy of the name ‘civilization’. The trade networks developed during their time connected distant parts of the world. Their tolerance of different cultures and religions, albeit a pragmatic one, set precedents for later empires, and their military innovations influenced warfare for centuries. Even after their political power waned, the Mongols remained a formidable cultural and historical force. ■

catocala/AdobeStock

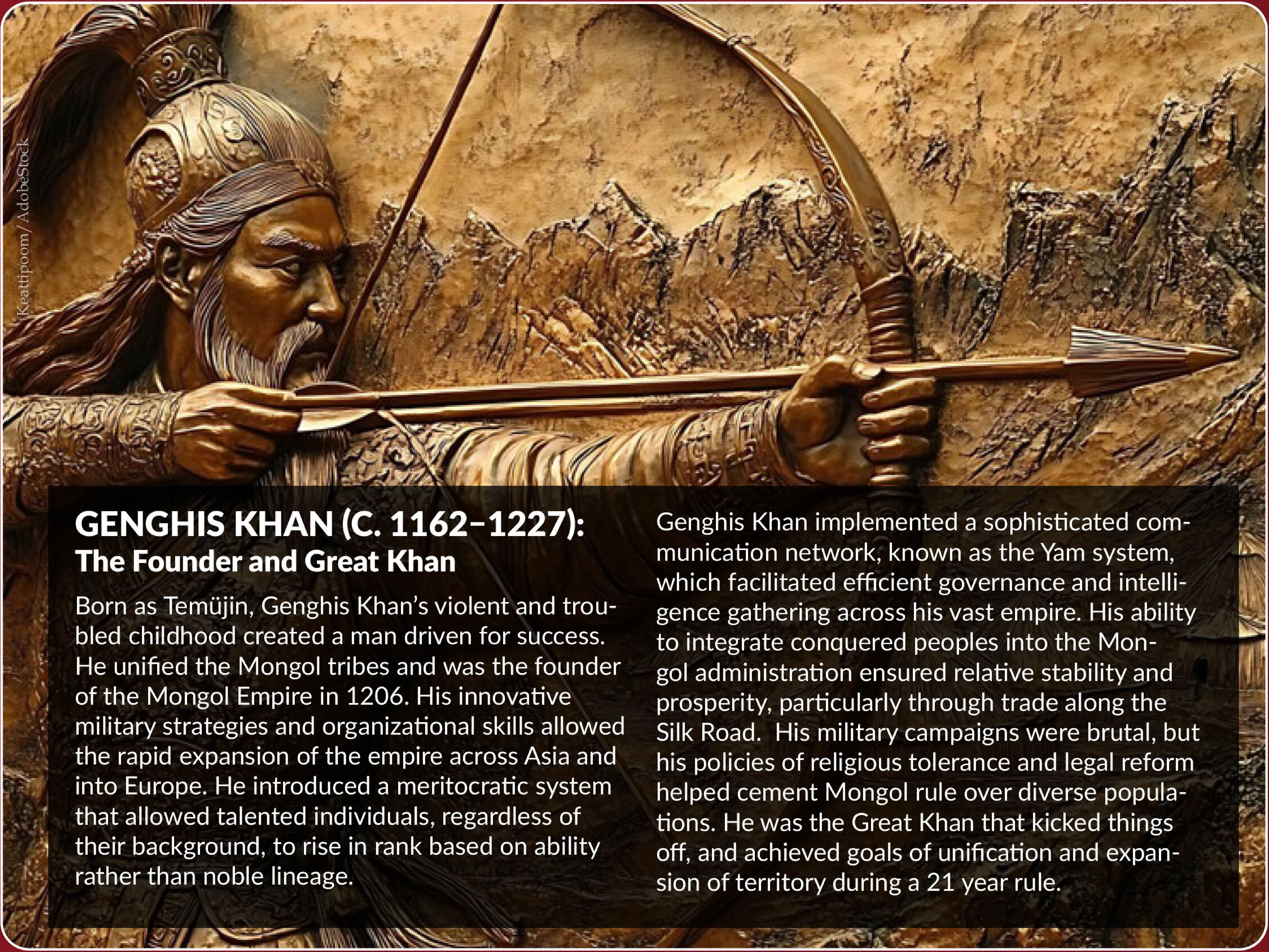
7 GREAT KHANS

The Mongol Empire's Most Influential Leaders

Although not the most ancient of civilizations (and indeed, many might argue it shouldn't be considered a civilization at all) the Mongol Empire became the largest contiguous land empire in history, stretching from East Asia to Europe. Established in the early 13th century, this vast expansion was achieved under the leadership of several influential figures whose strategies, governance, and military prowess shaped the course of history.

The Mongol Empire is remarkable in how it achieved such vast expansion in such a brief period of just a couple of centuries, before it fragmented once more. The expansion was not achieved by might alone, but needed governing strategy by shrewd operators.

Here, we explore seven of the most pivotal leaders of the Mongol Empire, comparing their contributions and assessing their impact on the empire's legacy.



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GENGHIS KHAN (C. 1162–1227):
The Founder and Great Khan

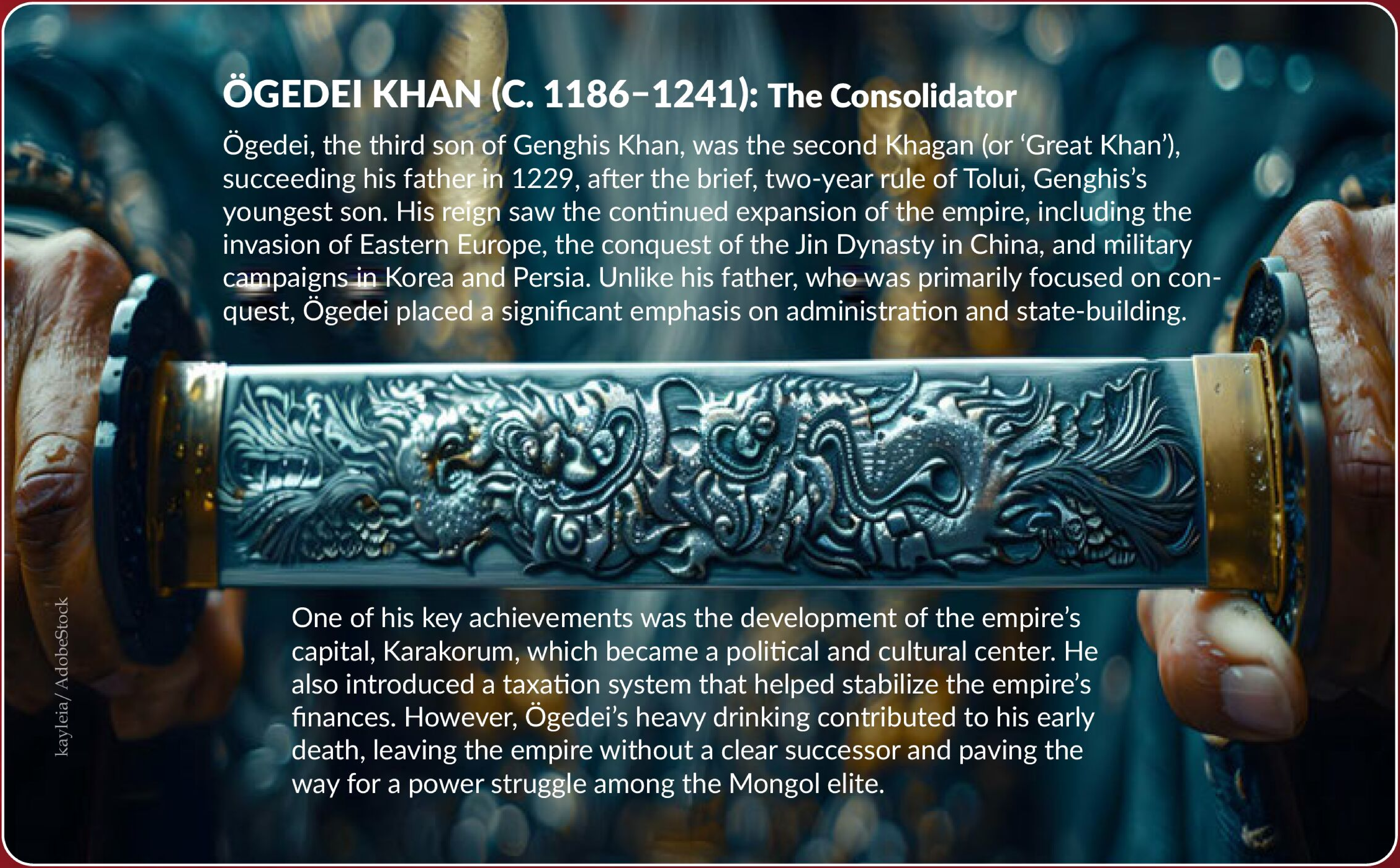
Born as Temüjin, Genghis Khan's violent and troubled childhood created a man driven for success. He unified the Mongol tribes and was the founder of the Mongol Empire in 1206. His innovative military strategies and organizational skills allowed the rapid expansion of the empire across Asia and into Europe. He introduced a meritocratic system that allowed talented individuals, regardless of their background, to rise in rank based on ability rather than noble lineage.

Genghis Khan implemented a sophisticated communication network, known as the Yam system, which facilitated efficient governance and intelligence gathering across his vast empire. His ability to integrate conquered peoples into the Mongol administration ensured relative stability and prosperity, particularly through trade along the Silk Road. His military campaigns were brutal, but his policies of religious tolerance and legal reform helped cement Mongol rule over diverse populations. He was the Great Khan that kicked things off, and achieved goals of unification and expansion of territory during a 21 year rule.

ÖGEDEI KHAN (C. 1186–1241): The Consolidator

Ögedei, the third son of Genghis Khan, was the second Khagan (or ‘Great Khan’), succeeding his father in 1229, after the brief, two-year rule of Tolui, Genghis’s youngest son. His reign saw the continued expansion of the empire, including the invasion of Eastern Europe, the conquest of the Jin Dynasty in China, and military campaigns in Korea and Persia. Unlike his father, who was primarily focused on conquest, Ögedei placed a significant emphasis on administration and state-building.

One of his key achievements was the development of the empire’s capital, Karakorum, which became a political and cultural center. He also introduced a taxation system that helped stabilize the empire’s finances. However, Ögedei’s heavy drinking contributed to his early death, leaving the empire without a clear successor and paving the way for a power struggle among the Mongol elite.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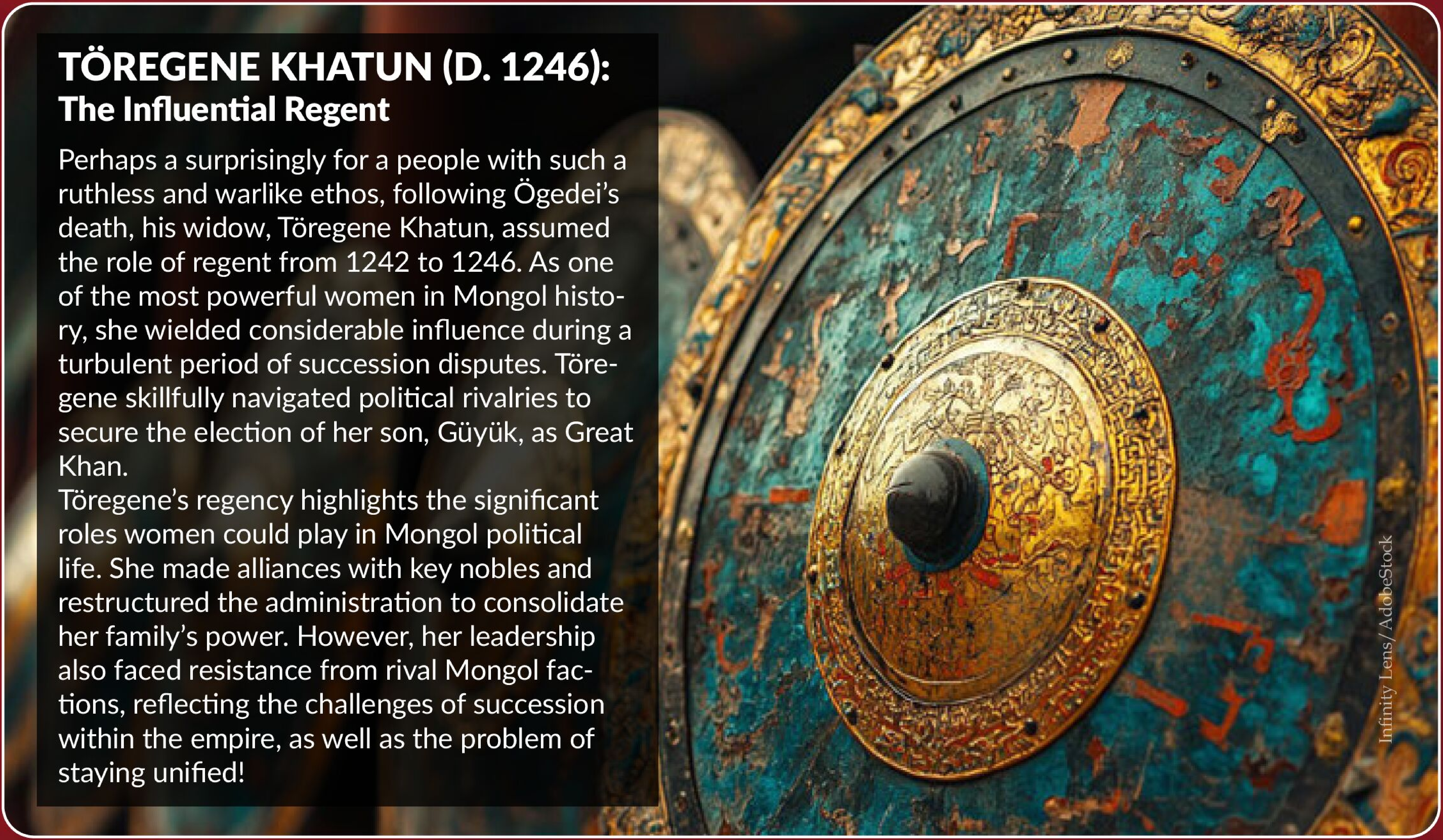
TÖREGENE KHATUN (D. 1246):
The Influential Regent

Perhaps a surprisingly for a people with such a ruthless and warlike ethos, following Ögedei’s death, his widow, Töregene Khatun, assumed the role of regent from 1242 to 1246. As one of the most powerful women in Mongol history, she wielded considerable influence during a turbulent period of succession disputes. Töregene skillfully navigated political rivalries to secure the election of her son, Güyük, as Great Khan.

Töregene’s regency highlights the significant roles women could play in Mongol political life. She made alliances with key nobles and restructured the administration to consolidate her family’s power. However, her leadership also faced resistance from rival Mongol factions, reflecting the challenges of succession within the empire, as well as the problem of staying unified!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GÜYÜK KHAN (C. 1206–1248):

The Brief Ruler

Güyük, the eldest son of Ögedei and Töregene, ascended to the position of Great Khan in 1246. His was another short reign, marked by internal conflicts and attempts to centralize authority, which faced resistance from other Mongol leaders. He approach was to strengthen the central government and rein in the autonomy of regional rulers, but his policies led to tensions with the influential Batu Khan of the infamous Golden Horde. Güyük's tenure underscores the challenges of maintaining unity within the rapidly expanding empire. His sudden death in 1248 led to another succession crisis, another example of the instability that plagued Mongol leadership transitions.

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MÖNGKE KHAN (1209–1259):

The Reformer

A grandson of Genghis Khan, Möngke became the Great Khan in 1251 after overcoming significant opposition. His reign was characterized by a focus on administrative reforms, fiscal policies, and further military campaigns. He launched successful campaigns in Persia and continued efforts to conquer the Song Dynasty in China.
Möngke streamlined tax collection, essential to fund the seemingly unquenchable Mongol thirst for world domination. He also went a long way to curb growing and troublesome corruption within the empire. His reforms strengthened the Mongol bureaucracy and improved governance, but his unexpected death in 1259 during the siege of a Song Chinese stronghold led to another period of political turmoil.

Hovhannes/ AdobeStock

KUBLAI KHAN (1215–1294):

The Emperor of China

The name Kublai ranks close to Genghis in the most famus of the Khans. Another grandson of Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan completed the conquest of China and established the Yuan Dynasty, becoming its first emperor in 1271. He moved the capital to present-day Beijing and embraced Chinese culture and administrative practices, which really sett him apart from previous Mongol rulers.

Kublai's reign marked a significant shift in Mongol governance, as he prioritized the integration of Chinese traditions into Mongol rule. His support for trade, infrastructure projects, and religious tolerance contributed to a thriving economy. However, his reliance on non-Mongol officials and the costs of military campaigns weakened the empire over time.

AI-Arts/ AdobeStock

Batu Khan (c. 1205–1255):

The Founder of the Golden Horde

Batu Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan through his son Jochi, led the Mongol forces into Eastern Europe, achieving notable victories such as the sacking of Kyiv in 1240. Under instructions from his uncle Ogedei, he established the Golden Horde, which ruled over parts of Russia and Eastern Europe for centuries, significantly impacting the region's development.

Batu's governance in these regions balanced Mongol military dominance with local autonomy, allowing Russian principalities to retain some self-rule while paying tribute. His ability to integrate different cultures and maintain stability contributed to the longevity of the Golden Horde.

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FREYA STARK: HISTORIAN, EXPLORER, AND TIRELESS AMBASSADOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

By Nathan Falde

Freya Madeline Stark (1923).

A survey of our planet's history across time would encounter many undiscovered worlds, both past and present. These are the rich and vibrant cultures whose accomplishments have been overlooked or marginalized.

Fortunately, there have always been investigators who take it upon themselves to champion the cause of these unseen cultures, often exerting a Herculean effort to bring their stories out of the darkness, to make sure the marvels they created are finally recognized and acknowledged. While many of these individuals are indigenous to the cultures they defend or celebrate, others are outsiders who strive to bring forth the truth about people they respect and admire.

The indefatigable British-Italian scholar and 20th century explorer Freya Stark belonged in the latter category. In her case it was the exotic and mysterious Middle East to which she was drawn, and what she learned over the course of a lifetime of adventure, study and travel helped enlighten the west about cultures they'd never even tried to understand.

Dreaming of Arabian Nights

Freya Stark was born in 1893, a child of two artists who drifted across Europe, their lives filled with creativity but little stability. Her early years were shaped by constant movement, from Paris to Italy, and an insatiable curiosity that would define her life. Unlike most girls of her time, she was not sheltered from the wider world. Instead, she was encouraged to explore, to read, and to dream of lands far beyond her doorstep. A severe childhood illness left her bedridden for months, and in those hours of solitude, she turned to books, particularly tales of the Middle East. Arabian Nights captivated her, planting the first seeds of an obsession that would drive her to become one of the greatest explorers of the 20th century.

As a young woman, Stark endured hardships that might have stifled another's ambitions. When she was thirteen, a factory accident left her with a mangled ear and scalp, injuries that required years of painful treatments. But rather than retreat into self-pity, she was resilient. She taught herself Arabic and Persian, absorbing the languages of the lands she longed to see. She studied history and literature, first at the University of London and later on her own, piecing together knowledge that formal education had denied her.

It wasn't until she was in her thirties that she finally set foot in the world she had dreamed of. In an era when women were rarely seen outside the safe confines of Western society, Stark boarded a ship bound for Lebanon, eager to lose herself in the winding streets of Beirut and Damascus. She traveled alone, with little more than a notebook and a determination to uncover history hidden beyond the reach of maps.

NURDIYANNA/AdobeStock

The Valley of the Assassins

Her first great adventure came in 1927 when she set out for Persia (modern-day Iran), to explore the remote Valley of the Assassins. This valley, a mountainous and forbidding region, had once been the stronghold of the Nizari Ismailis, a sect feared in the Middle Ages for their assassinations of political rivals.

Legends surrounded the valley, but few outsiders had ever dared venture there. Stark, however, was undeterred. She made contact with local tribes, winning their trust through her knowledge of their history and language. She traveled on horseback through treacherous mountain passes, recording her findings in meticulous detail. Her discoveries, including ruins and inscriptions previously unknown to Western scholars, reshaped what was known about the secretive sect. She brought the lost history of the Assassins to the world, earning her a reputation as both an explorer and a historian.

A panoramic view of Masyaf Castle in Syria.

EmiCem Photography / AdobeStock

Her writings about her journey, published in The Valleys of the Assassins (1934), were met with acclaim. The book was part travelogue and part historical excavation, opening a window into a world that had long been unknown. Stark's descriptions of landscapes, people, and ancient unknown ruins captivated readers, and her ability to merge personal adventure with historical scholarship set her apart from other travel writers of the time.

Arabia Beckons

Not content with one great discovery, she continued her Middle Eastern explorations. In the 1930s, she set her sights on southern Arabia, a land of myths and merchant routes, where few Europeans had dared to venture. The region had once been home to the ancient kingdom of Shabwa, a city tied to the lucrative frankincense trade that had connected the Arabian Peninsula to Rome, Egypt, and India. Stark believed that remnants of this forgotten civilization could still be found in the Hadhramaut, a harsh and remote region of modern-day Yemen.

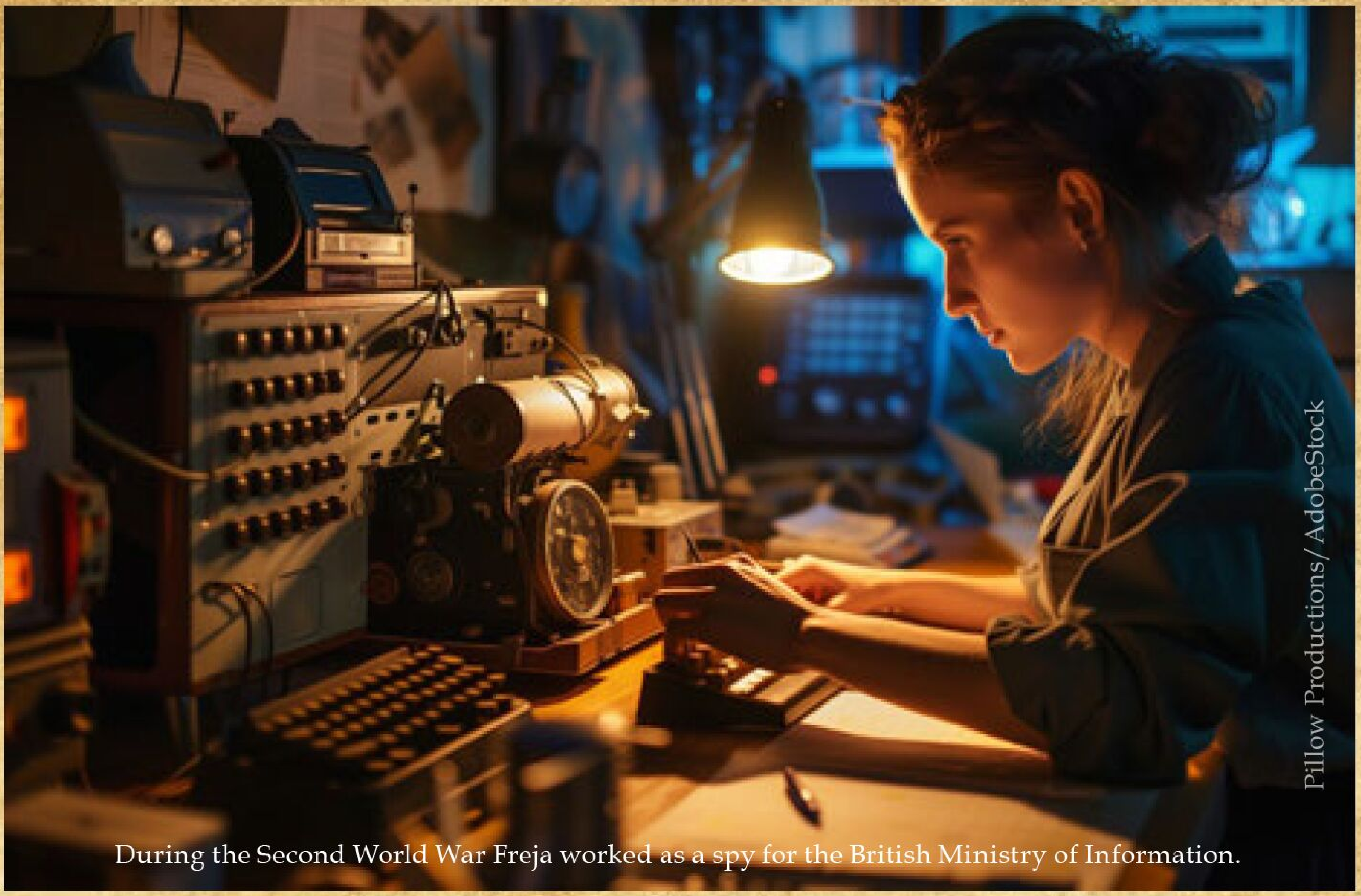
Undeterred by the dangers—tribal warfare, disease, and the sheer difficulty of navigating such an unforgiving landscape—she embarked on an ambitious expedition, documenting ancient ruins and trade routes that had long been lost to history. Her work helped to chart previously unmapped parts of Arabia, and her writings introduced the West to a world that had remained obscured by sand and time. She endured illness, exhaustion, and frequent hostility, but she never faltered in her mission to record what others had overlooked.

Freja wrote the book *The Valleys of the Assassins.*

Her ability to navigate these regions so smoothly was a result of her natural skill at diplomacy. Unlike many Western explorers, who imposed their authority on the local populations with the arrogance common to colonial usurpers, Stark was empathetic and sympathetic. She treated the people she encountered with dignity and respect, learning their customs, listening to their stories, and earning their trust. Her approach won her allies, and it allowed her to access places that had remained closed to outsiders for centuries.

Supporting the Fight Against the Nazis

During World War II, Stark's talents were recognized by the British government. She was recruited by the Ministry of Information to use her knowledge of the Middle East to counter Nazi



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During the Second World War Freja worked as a spy for the British Ministry of Information.

propaganda in the region. She traveled extensively, delivering speeches and writing pamphlets that encouraged local populations to resist Axis influence. Her work was invaluable in securing goodwill for the Allied forces, and her understanding of Middle Eastern politics made her an indispensable asset. Even in wartime, she remained committed to preserving the cultural and historical integrity of the lands she loved, as she worked tirelessly to keep the destructive forces of war at bay, ensuring that protection of the region's fabulous ruins and artifacts.

After the war, Stark continued her explorations and writings. She traveled across the Middle East into southern Asia, through Turkey, Afghanistan, and India, documenting ancient sites and preserving oral histories that might have otherwise been ignored. She wrote over twenty books, each a testament to her ability to blend history, travel, and personal reflection. Her work provided invaluable insights into regions that were still, even in the 20th century, shrouded in mystery and misconception.

A Century's Worth of Adventures

Freya Stark's life literally spanned the 20th century. She passed away not long after her 100th birthday in 1993, leaving behind a legacy as a historian that is profound. Her travels brought attention to civilizations that had been neglected by historians, and her voluminous writings (she composed more than two dozen books) preserved knowledge that might have vanished forever without her intervention. She inspired generations of travelers, historians, and archaeologists, demonstrating how historical study could be a living, breathing enterprise, brought to life through immersion in landscapes, stories, and ancient ruins scattered across the world.

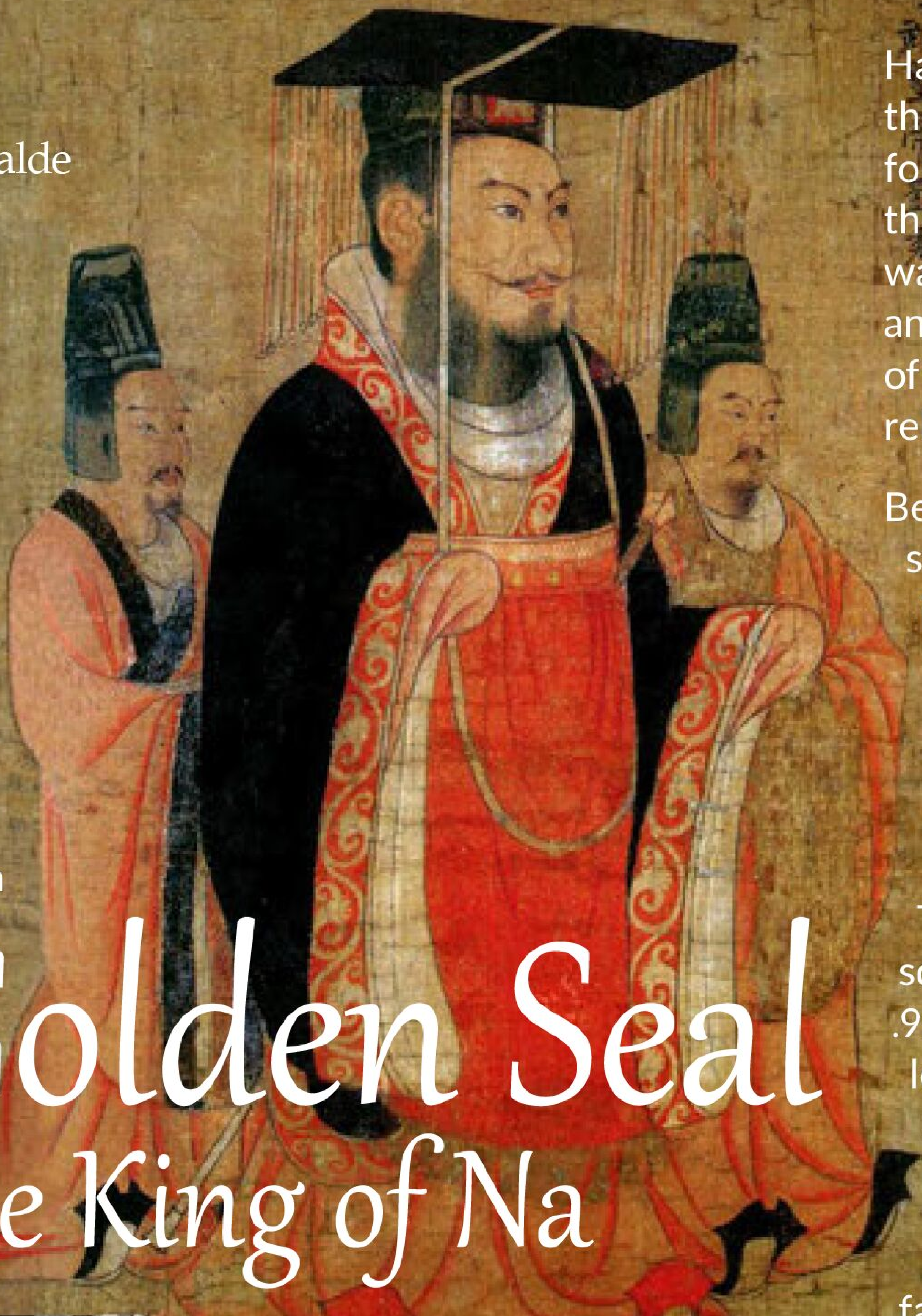
With breathtaking fearlessness, Freya Stark shattered the constraints placed upon women of her time, venturing into lands where few men, let alone women, had dared to go. She adopted the attitude of the eager student who was surrounded by teachers, rejecting the racist assumptions and patronizing behaviors that tainted the interactions of most westerners who visited countries their forefathers had colonized.

Because of her openness, her contributions to history, archaeology, and geography were immense. Through her writings, the world was given a glimpse into places that had remained unseen and poorly understood for centuries. She gladly assumed the role of a guardian of history, in a region that she loved her whole life.

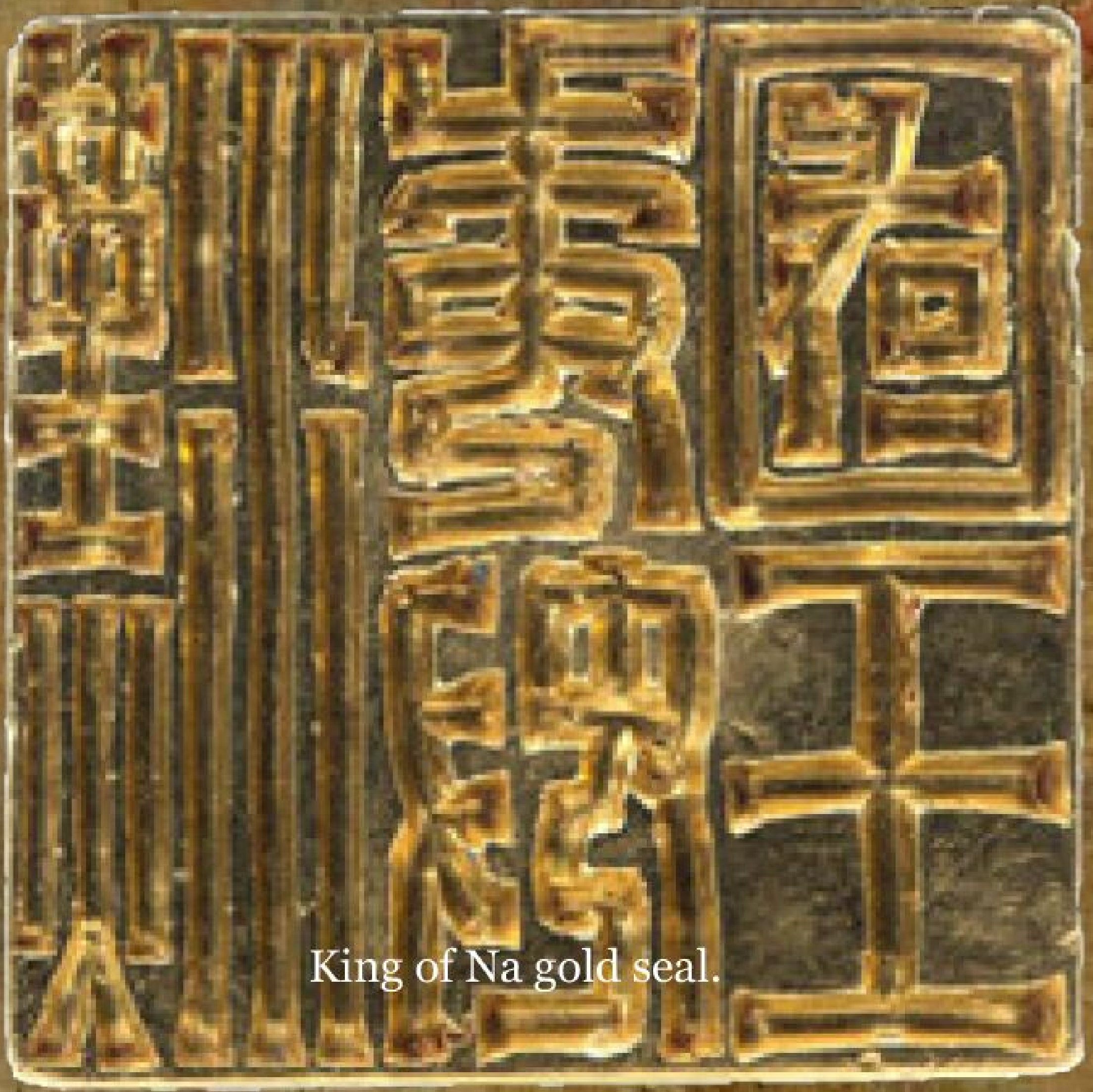
Freya Stark's life story was defined by her relentless curiosity and unwavering courage. She acted as an ambassador for forgotten civilizations, and changed the way the world saw the Middle East. She was, and remains, a hero of history, a woman who preserved the past so that the future might learn of it, and learn from it. ■

The Golden Seal
of the King of Na

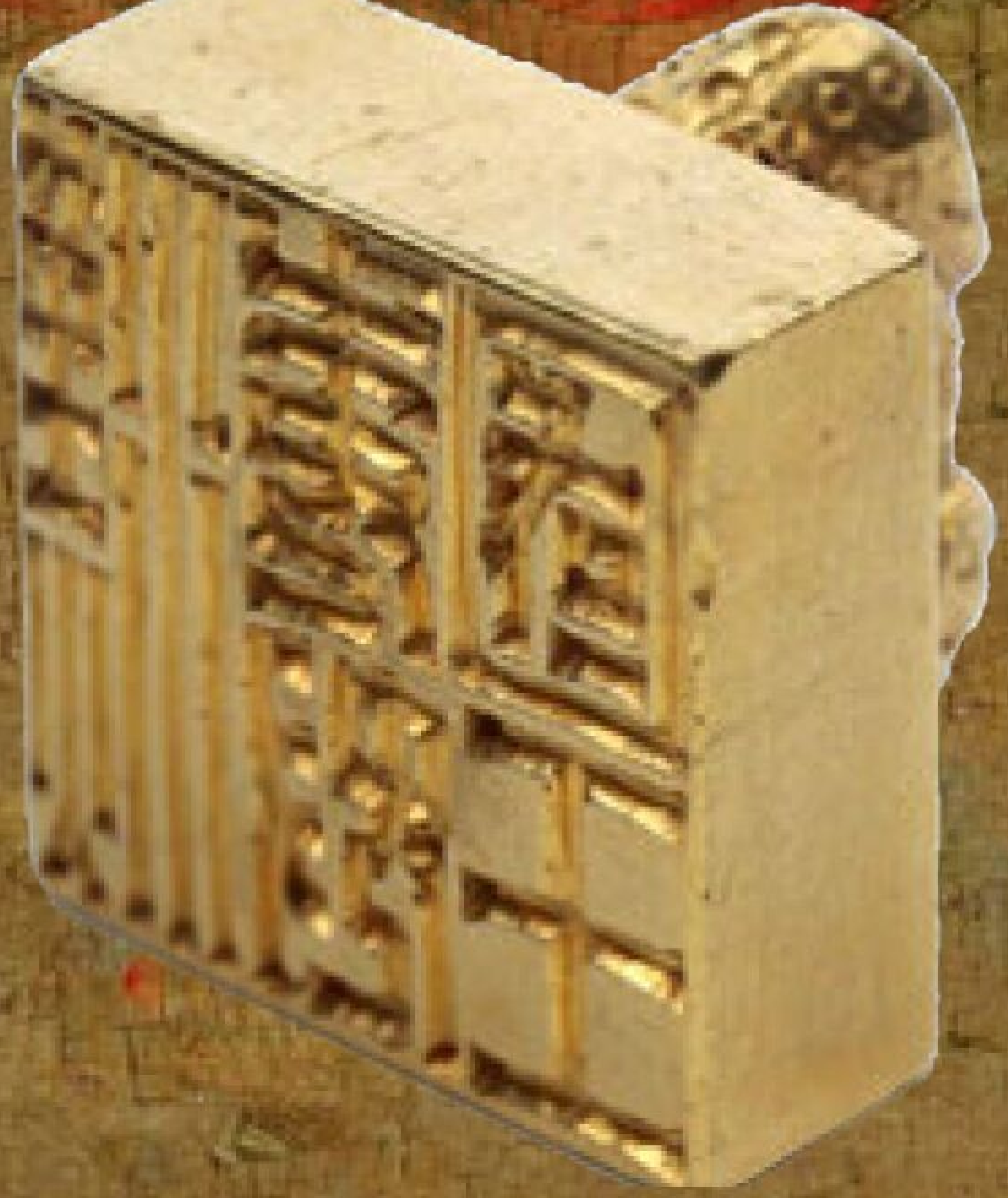
By Nathan Falde



An extremely small golden artifact from the earliest days of Japan's existence is one of the nation's most valuable and valued historical treasures. This is the Golden Seal of the King of Na, a courtly artifact that was given to an ancient monarch by none other than Emperor Guangwu from China's famous Han Dynasty, who arrived in Japan on a diplomatic visit in 57 AD.



King of Na gold seal.



A seal of this type was standard equipment for ancient aristocrats. But normally these items were made from jade, so to receive an official seal made of gold from a visiting dignitary would have been recognized as a sign of great respect.

The seal was imprinted with five Chinese characters, which when translated proved that this was the official seal of the "King of Na, of the Wa, vassal of the Han." The kingdom of Na was part of the larger state of Wa, the original name for the island nation known today as Japan, and at this stage of its development it was indeed included under the umbrella of the Han Dynasty. Most significantly, the words on the seal are the oldest form of documentation that proves the state of Wa actually existed and was not just the stuff of legends, and that is why it is considered one of Japan's most important historical relics.

Beyond the Golden Seal's significance in Japanese history, it also happens to be a striking artifact in its own right. The seal is made from 95% pure gold, and is topped with an intricately designed snake-head handle that is a finely crafted piece of art. The seal's base is cut to a perfect square, each side measuring just .924 inches (2.347 centimeters) in length. But with an artifact as rare and as ancient as the Golden Seal of Na, size truly does not matter.

The Golden Seal of Na has a fascinating origin story. But its recovery story is also memorable. In 1784 a farmer was digging in an irrigation ditch on Shikanoshima Island when he unearthed a box that contained this glistening golden object. How the seal came to be in such an out-of-the-way location is unknown, but its discovery can best be classified as nothing short of a miracle.

While the Golden Seal of Na links the earliest version of Japan to China's Han Dynasty, its antiquity helps establish a line of historical continuity in Japanese statehood that extends back nearly 2,000 years. At this time, the seal is on display in the collection of the Fukuoka City Museum in Fukuoka, the only artifact designated as a national treasure to hold this distinction.

TIME MAPS: MESOPOTAMIA
BY MARTINI FISHER

Written with a Mathematician's precision and a Historian's curiosity, "Time Maps: Mesopotamia" discusses the culture and people of Mesopotamia who produced some of the fundamental mindsets that we still very much recognize today, as well as the innovations that they created. One of our forgotten cultural ancestors, our inheritance from Mesopotamia is vastly greater than can be erased by centuries of philosophical and moral debates.

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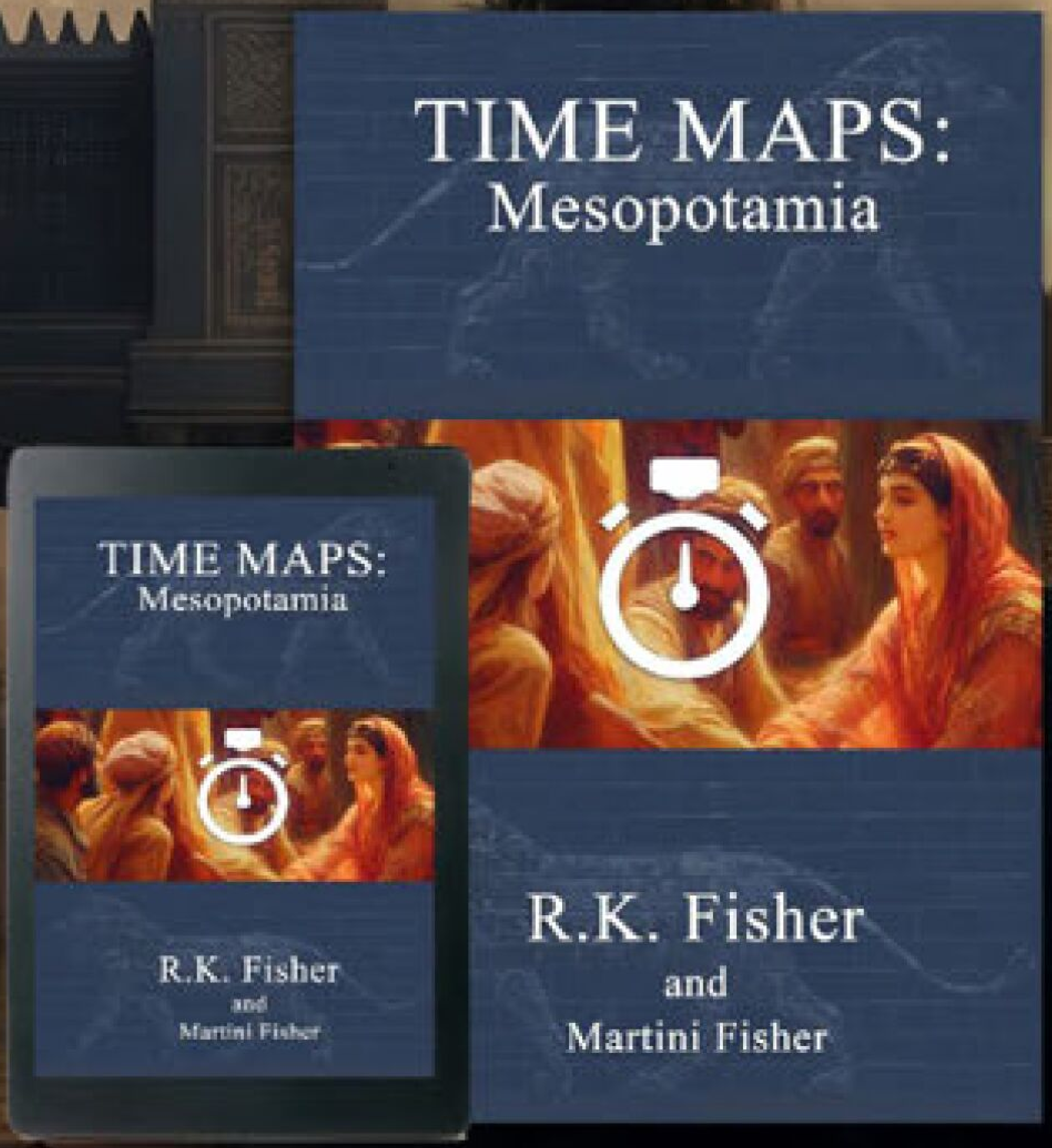
TIME MAPS:
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Warriors and Kings:
The 1500 Year Battle for Celtic Britain

From the author of The Magical History of Britain
'A remarkable book' ROBERT PLANT
WARRIORS
AND
KINGS
THE 1500-YEAR
BATTLE FOR
CELTIC
BRITAIN
MARTIN WALL

By Martin Wall

The story of the centuries-long resistance of the indigenous peoples of Britain, to the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Normans and English. How did the Celtic tribes and nations survive against overwhelming odds for so long? This is the story of their gallant struggle, led by some of the most enduring heroes of history and myth – Caratacus, Boudica, Cadwallon, Llewelyn 'the Last', Owain Glyndwr – and of course, Arthur.

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Courtesy of Refik Kutluer.

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A. Refik Kutluer is a man of many talents and extensive knowledge about a range of topics. He is currently the partner and General Manager of Alabanda Tourism Inc. in Ankara, and he was the first tourism executive in Turkey to hold the title of "CTIE – Certified Travel Industry Executive."

Kutluer is also the founder of Ref Productions, through which he and his wife, flute soloist Şefika Kutluer, organized an International Festival in Turkey with the theme "East Meets West" for 15 years.

Additionally, he serves as the President of ANKUGE, the Association for Research and Development of Anatolian Cultures, which is dedicated to preserving and promoting Anatolian cultural heritage. His company sponsors excavations in the ancient Carian city of Alabanda.

Besides all this, Kutluer possesses an extraordinary depth and breadth of knowledge about the ancient world, about its peoples and its accomplishments. We were fortunate that he agreed to sit down with us for an interview, during which he offered elucidation and enlightenment about the development of ancient civilizations and cultures, which challenge us to comprehend their mind-bending combination of the exceptional, the mysterious, and the familiar.

Ancient Civilizations & Cross-Cultural Influences

Q: How did early civilizations interact and influence each other despite geographical barriers?

A. Refik Kutluer: Early civilizations displayed remarkable interactions and influences on each other through various means, including trade, migration, wars, and the exchange of ideas and technologies. The primary method for transmitting knowledge and culture was oral communication facilitated by travelers, merchants, and immigrants.

Alternatively, it can be argued that the path to wisdom for humanity is singular, suggesting that the human brain might have developed similar ideas and solutions independently, even without direct interaction. Similarly, in today's world, quantum theories challenge the traditional laws of physics by proposing that two separate particles can interact instantaneously, a phenomenon known as quantum entanglement. This concept may help explain how disconnected human beings have arrived at similar solutions independently.

Q: Can we see evidence of shared knowledge, myths, or religious beliefs across different ancient cultures?

A.Refik Kutluer: Several similarities suggest that ancient civilizations, despite being geographically distant and culturally distinct, may have had some form of interaction, exchange, or shared human experiences that led to similar themes and ideas.

One prominent example is the story of Noah's Ark in the Bible, which is also present in the ancient Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh. Similarly, the tale of a "flood sent by God" is found in the Quran, and the Muslims believe that Noah's Ark remains on the hills of Mount Ararat, in Turkey.

Another comparable story appears in ancient Hindu scriptures, featuring Manu and the god Vishnu. Additionally, Greek mythology contains numerous stories of gods punishing humanity with catastrophic floods.

The Sumerians had many aspects in common with the three monotheistic religions, including the creative and destructive power of God,

> **Several similarities suggest that ancient civilizations, despite being geographically distant and culturally distinct, may have had some form of interaction, exchange, or shared human experiences that led to similar themes and ideas.**

Max Yamuna / AdobeStock

View of the excavation area of Göbekli Tepe.

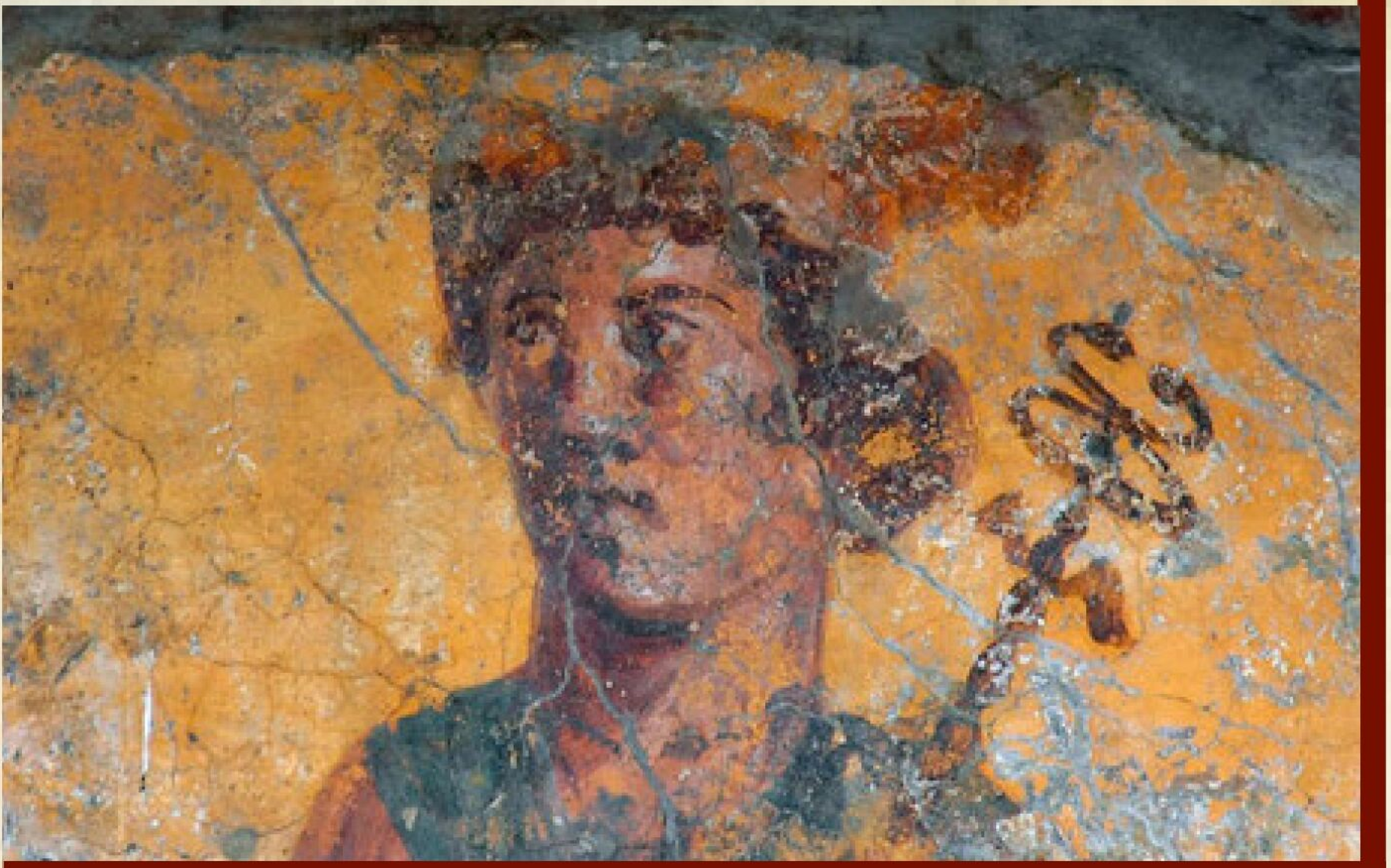
the concept of judgment, and a sense of fear towards God. They believed in pleasing God through sacrifices and prayers, as well as the importance of good morals, honesty, and justice. Additionally, they showed respect for both elders and minors, advocated for social justice, and emphasized cleanliness. Cleanliness was particularly significant for the Sumerians; those who visited the temple to pray and make sacrifices were expected to be clean.

Q: How did early writing systems influence one another, and what role did they play in preserving and spreading philosophies?

A. Refik Kutluer: Over 6,000 years ago, the Sumerians migrated from Asia and settled in southern Iraq, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where they established a remarkable civilization that still influences us today. A pivotal achievement of this civilization was the invention of a writing system known as Cuneiform, which emerged nearly 5,000 years ago. This writing started with simple pictographs depicting objects but evolved to express complex ideas and concepts. Neighboring cultures such as the Assyrians, Hittites, Hurrians, and Urartians adopted Cuneiform for their own languages, extending its reach to societies like the Ugarites and Persians.

The script was inscribed on soft clay tablets, which were dried in the sun or ovens, preserving them for thousands of years. In the last century, excavations revealed these ancient tablets, leading to the deciphering of their inscriptions and uncovering a rich history that spans 3,000

A pivotal achievement of this civilization was the invention of a writing system known as Cuneiform, which emerged nearly 5,000 years ago. This writing started with simple pictographs depicting objects but evolved to express complex ideas and concepts.



Fresco of Mercury-Hermes, Pompeii.

years, bringing to light the legacies of the Sumerians and other Middle Eastern civilizations.

With writing, civilizations were able to transfer their knowledge and beliefs to each other. In addition to the transfer of current information by neighboring civilizations that could understand each other's languages, a bridge between the past and the present was established thanks to tablets that could be found and deciphered thousands of years later.

Q: Are there specific examples where a philosophy or belief system from one civilization shaped the development of another?

A. Refik Kutluer: Many religions and philosophies that preceded one another influence later movements, often deifying natural forces in humanity's search for "truth."

For example, the Persian Mithraic religion and its cult significantly inspired Stoic philosophy in the 1st century.

The Stoics' beliefs in astronomy and astrology, which were influenced by Mithras, contributed to their understanding that "fate cannot be challenged." This perspective, shaped by Stoic thought in Tarsus, combined with the personalization of natural forces and a belief in monotheism, evolved into the Christian understanding of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Raised with Stoic philosophy, St. Paul supports complete indifference to social conditions in the pursuit of salvation. For Paul (also known as Saul of Tarsus), the essential principles of life include righteousness, virtue, devotion to religion, faith, helping the needy, loving God, following the teachings of Jesus, and seeking knowledge.

Q: Is it true that there were actually four Jesus figures in history?

A. Refik Kutluer: The first and oldest figure that comes to mind is the "Egyptian Jesus," represented by the Egyptian God of wisdom, Thoth, who dates back to around 3000 BC. Thoth later evolved into Hermes, known as Hermes Trismegistus, who was blessed three times during the Ancient Greek period.

According to Hermetic thought, Thoth is considered a predecessor to Jesus. Additionally, it is worth noting that the first known belief in monotheism was centered around the Egyptian God Aten, around 1300 BC. Some sources, like James Churchward, suggest that this concept of monotheism

Jesus Christ in the painting Ecce homo by Antonio Ciseri.

was initially introduced to Egypt by Hermes, who brought it from the lost civilizations of Mu and Atlantis, dating back as far as 16,000 BC.

Then comes the Iranian “Zoroastrian Jesus”: Saoshyant (Zoroastrianism) (500 – 600 BC). The prophecy that the person who was born from a virgin woman would save the world was first stated in this belief, which can be seen as the foundation of the messianic faith.

We also have a contemporary of Jesus Christ from Anatolia named Apollonios. He was born in Bor, which is the town of Tyana in the Roman province of Cappadocia, in 27 BC, and he died in Ephesus in 14 AD.

Jesus of Nazareth is believed to have been born in 1 AD, and to have died around 30 AD. This implies that Jesus passed away years before Christianity was fully established.

During the Historical Council of Nicaea, the name Apollonius was erased from history, the assertion that he was Jesus was rejected, and the name Tyana was established to replace Apollonia.

Apollonius was the son of a cultured and wealthy family who provided him with a good education. At the age of 16, he traveled to Tarsus with the support of his family. There, he studied in a school founded by Pythagoras, which offered semi-religious teachings rooted in mystery and philosophy. This school also shared a perspective similar to that of the Ophites. Some also state that the Christian Prophet Jesus is actually Apollonius himself!

According to Roman sources, in 135 AD, the name “Apollonia” was used in place of “Tyana,” and the term “Apollonians” referred to the local people instead of “Romans.” These documents describe Apollonius of Tyana as a miracle creator, healer, fortune teller, magician, and philosopher who followed the

The God Mithra in Hama Museum.

The archaeological site of Karahan Tepe.

teachings of Pythagoras. He is said to have expelled the demons that caused famine in the city of Ephesus, similar to how Prophet Jesus expelled demons from a possessed woman. Additionally, he is credited with resurrecting the dead daughter of a wealthy family in Ephesus, much like Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

While Apollonius was on trial in Rome, he suddenly vanished from the courtroom just before the death sentence was to be handed down. This incident was documented in historical records and the official minutes of the Roman Empire.

There are also claims that he cured a blind man and ended the Black Plague. During the Historical Council of Nicaea, the name Apollonius was erased from history, the assertion that he was Jesus was rejected, and the name Tyana was established to replace Apollonia.

Are they all the same person, or are they figures created for the same purpose and then clothed with many legends and miracles? In other words, were existing different people equipped with this philosophical and religious symbolism?

Göbekli Tepe, Karahan Tepe, and Nevali Çori: Rethinking History

Q: How did Göbekli Tepe change the way we understand the rise of civilization, and why is it considered a game-changer in history?

A. Refik Kutluer: Göbekli Tepe, known as the "world's oldest temple," is approximately 12,000 years old. It was constructed by hunter-gatherers during the pre-Pottery Neolithic period, long before the invention of writing and the wheel.

Göbekli Tepe has transformed our understanding of human civilization. Some believe that this site represents a significant milestone in the evolution of religion and humanity's connection with God, marking the beginning of civilization itself.

Göbekli Tepe raises questions about the creation date of Adam and Eve, proving they existed long before the timeline provided by the three major monotheistic religions.

Göbekli Tepe is considered a game-changer archaeological site because it challenges long-held beliefs about the origins of civilization. Traditionally, it was believed

Göbekli Tepe has transformed our understanding of human civilization. Some believe that this site represents a significant milestone in the evolution of religion and humanity's connection with God, marking the beginning of civilization itself.

Detail of the animal craved on the pillars of Göbekli Tepe.

that agriculture and settled lifestyles were the main drivers of complex societies. However, Göbekli Tepe demonstrates that social organization and ritualistic practices, including worship, played an equally significant role in early human development.

This discovery alters our understanding of how human societies emerged, suggesting that our ancestors were capable of remarkable achievements in social cooperation, artistry, and spirituality long before they became settled farmers. It questions the linear models of civilization's rise and opens up new perspectives on the relationship between social complexity, ritual practices, and the emergence of civilization itself.

Q: What do the Neolithic "Stone Hills" of Göbekli Tepe, Karahan Tepe, and Nevali Çori reveal about early spiritual and societal structures?

A. Refik Kutluer: Around 12,000 years ago, one of the most significant changes in human history was occurring in the region between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. During this time, humanity was transitioning from a nomadic forager lifestyle to a settled way of living, moving away from hunting and gathering toward farming and production.

The transition period may have lasted several centuries or even up to a millennium. Göbekli Tepe, Karahan Tepe, and Nevali Çori demonstrate that ritualistic practices were crucial in the formation of larger social networks and cooperative workforces, even before the emergence of settled agricultural societies and organized religions. These sites served as temples that brought together people from distant areas for communal ceremonies and rituals.

Göbekli Tepe, Karahan Tepe, and Nevali Çori demonstrate that ritualistic practices were crucial in the formation of larger social networks and cooperative workforces, even before the emergence of settled agricultural societies and organized religions.

I believe the primary motivation behind these rituals was to appease the gods, seeking their permission for a life free from natural disasters and for a favorable environment conducive to farming.

The means to achieve this involved worshiping the powerful forces of nature and making sacrifices to the gods.

Q: Do these sites suggest a more complex and organized society than previously thought for hunter-gatherers?

A. Refik Kutluer: Yes, Göbekli Tepe, Karahan Tepe, and Nevali Çori seem to be part of a larger network of ritual centers in the region. This suggests that early human societies were not as geographically isolated as previously thought. They likely held complex spiritual beliefs, which may have been animistic or shamanistic, and viewed their world as deeply interconnected with both the natural and supernatural realms.

One of the most important insights from these sites is that hunter-gatherer societies were able to develop complex social organizations long before the emergence of agriculture. This challenges the traditional model, which suggests that only after the rise of farming did societies become complex enough to support monumental architecture, hierarchical leadership, and large-scale religious or ritualistic activities.

These sites imply that the reasons for constructing monumental structures may have been more influenced by spiritual or ritual needs rather than economic necessity. The motivation to create spaces for communal worship and to appease deities or supernatural forces may have driven early humans to organize labor and resources in ways once thought only possible after the transition to settled agricultural life.

The symbolic carvings and ritualistic architecture found at these sites indicate that early humans possessed advanced symbolic thought and abstract reasoning. The ability to plan and execute such complex monumental constructions suggests a level of collective consciousness.

Traditionally, it was believed that these essential traits of humanity emerged only after settled life began.

Q: How do the symbols and carvings at Göbekli Tepe compare to those in other ancient civilizations? Could they suggest early global connections or shared knowledge?

A. Refik Kutluer: The symbols and carvings found at Göbekli Tepe indicate that Neolithic societies possessed a complex spiritual worldview characterized by deep symbolic thinking. Although there is no definitive evidence of direct global connections between Göbekli Tepe and later ancient civilizations, the presence of shared motifs, such as animal imagery, and the potential for shamanistic practices suggest the possibility of cultural diffusion. This may indicate that common symbolic themes spread across early human societies.

Detail of the animal craved on the pillars of Göbekli Tepe.

Göbekli Tepe may have been part of a larger network of ritual sites where ideas and beliefs related to animal symbolism and spirituality were shared among different groups. This sharing could have occurred through trade, migration, or ritual practices. Alternatively, these common symbols might represent universal archetypes that are deeply embedded in human cognition, arising independently in various regions but expressing similar spiritual and cultural themes.

Spiritual leaders of the Shamans have historically used animal symbols to connect the human and spiritual realms. These practices may have spread across different regions, resulting in similar motifs appearing at sites like Göbekli Tepe, as well as in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and beyond.

I believe the collective unconscious accounts for these similarities, driven by universal human themes such as “life and death,” “life after death,” “protection,” and “harmony with nature and supernatural forces.”

A recent study reveals that the ancestors of the people who constructed Stonehenge traveled west across the Mediterranean before arriving in Britain. Researchers in London analyzed DNA extracted from Neolithic human remains discovered in Britain and compared it to that of people who lived in Europe during the same period. The Neolithic inhabitants are believed to have traveled from Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) to Iberia before making their way north.

One noteworthy discovery is the “Dolmen de Guadalperal,” often referred to as the Spanish Stonehenge, located at the Valdecañas Reservoir in Spain. This site is thought to have been used for religious rituals and may serve as an example of the cultural connections between the people who traveled from Göbeklitepe to Stonehenge.

Archaeologists believe that humans reached Britain around 4,000 BC. Evidence, such as human bones found in soil from niches behind the stone pillars at the site—similar to those discovered at Göbeklitepe—along with a significant amount of animal bones, suggests that ritual sacrifices were commonly performed there.

This practice may be compared to the later site of Durrington Walls, located near Stonehenge in Wiltshire, England. Dating back to around 2600 BC, Durrington Walls features a large ritual timber circle where vast quantities of animal bones, primarily from pigs and cattle, have been uncovered. Perhaps all these temples were sites of sacrifices intended to please the gods and seek their favor. This was mankind’s way of transitioning from hunting and gathering to farming and production.

Q: Why do you think Göbekli Tepe was intentionally buried? What theories exist about its sudden disappearance?

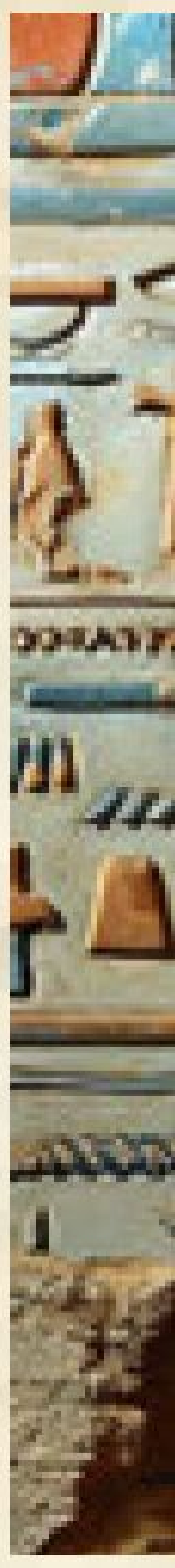
A. Refik Kutluer: The individuals who gathered at these temples did not reside in the area permanently; they wanted to ensure that the temples remained safe until their next visit. It has been discovered that the builders buried these temples under the soil, likely to preserve and protect the site from external threats or the effects of time, until the next sacrificial ceremony—perhaps until the next harvest season.

The Evolution of Philosophies & Religious Thought

Q: How did early belief systems evolve from shamanistic traditions to organized religions?

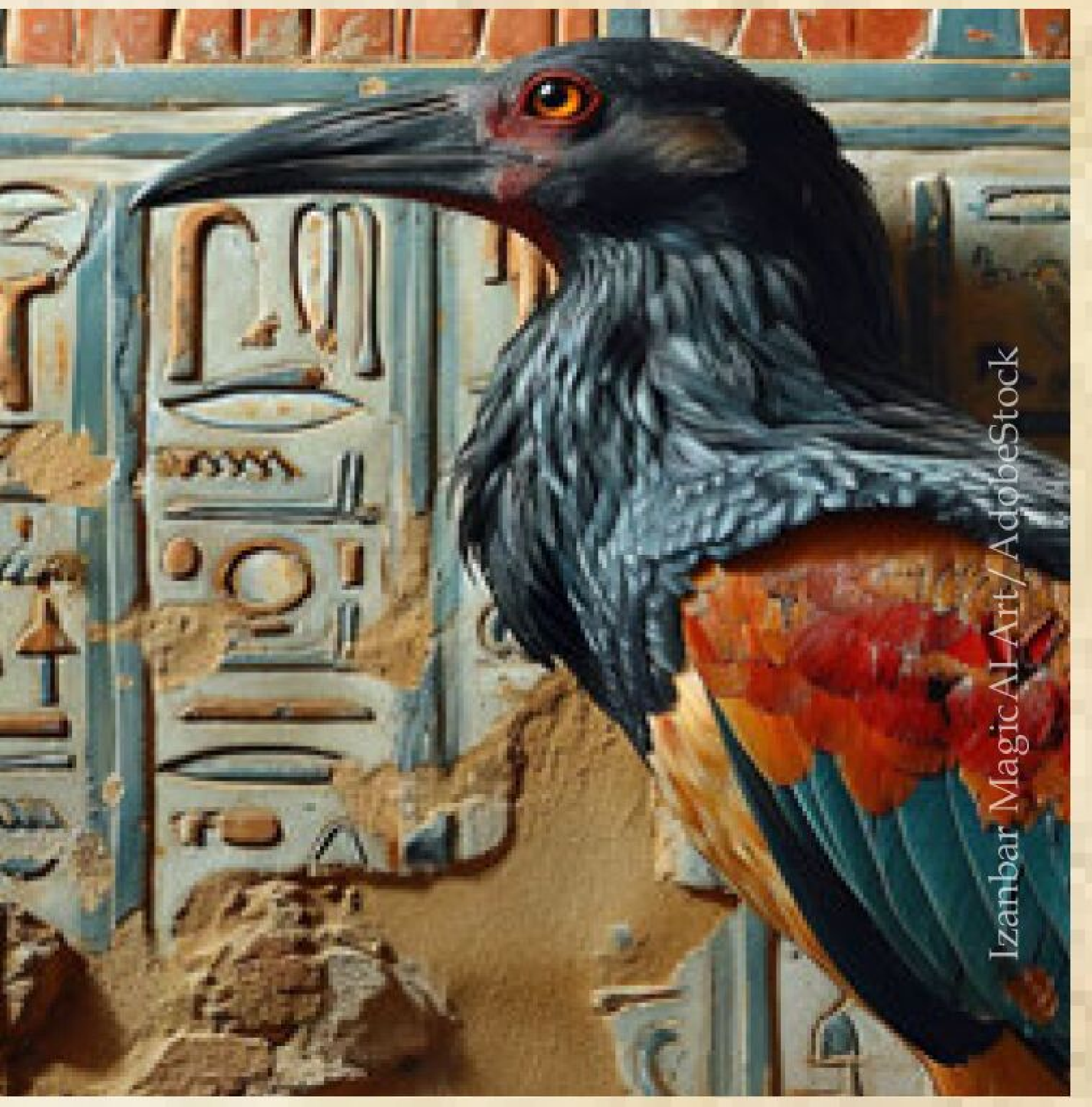
A. Refik Kutluer: As knowledge accumulated and the enlightenment of ancient times progressed, the “thinking brain” began to seek truth both within itself and in the world around it. This shift marked a transition from pagan polytheism to philosophical thought.

Before the emergence of dogmatic religions, science was not sufficiently advanced, and people sought answers



Although there is no definitive evidence of direct global connections between Göbekli Tepe and later ancient civilizations, the presence of shared motifs, such as animal imagery, and the potential for shamanistic practices suggest the possibility of cultural diffusion. This may indicate that common symbolic themes spread across early human societies.

through their capacity for thought. As the search for knowledge progressed during the age of philosophy, scientific advancements began to foster genuine enlightenment among thinkers. However, when this abundance of enlightenment started complicating the governance of society, the authorities found it necessary to steer people back toward dogmas and religious doctrine.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Dogmatic religions emerged and increasingly influenced society until science reestablished its dominance, driven by the Enlightenment during the Renaissance.

The transition from shamanistic traditions to organized religions was a gradual and complex process that took place over thousands of years. Early belief systems were deeply personal and closely connected to the natural world, emphasizing each individual's spiritual relationship with the divine through direct experiences and rituals.

As societies became more complex due to agriculture, urbanization, and political centralization, religion began to institutionalize, with the emergence of priests, temples, and sacred texts that guided spiritual and social life.

The rise of monotheism marked a significant shift in religious thought, highlighting the belief in a single god, the importance of ethical living, and the establishment of universal laws.

Despite these transformations, the spiritual roles of shamans—as mediators, healers, and spiritual leaders—continue to resonate in modern religious practices, ensuring that the legacy of shamanism remains an integral part of human religious history.

Q: Did civilizations like Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley influence each other's gods, myths, or rituals?

A. Refik Kutluer: Yes, indeed. For example, the Egyptian god of wisdom is Thoth, dating back to 3000 BC. He later became known as Hermes -who was blessed 3 times- during the Ancient Greek period and was referred to as Hermes Trismegistus.

According to Hermetic thought, Thoth is considered a predecessor of Jesus. Additionally, the first known "monotheistic" belief is attributed to the Egyptian god Aten around 1300 BC. James Churchward suggests that this concept of monotheism was first introduced to Egypt by Hermes, originating from the lost civilizations of Mu and Atlantis, which he dates to around 16,000 BC.

Then comes the Iranian "Zoroastrian Jesus": Saoshyant (Zoroastrianism) (500 – 600 BC). The prophecy that the person who was born from a virgin

The amazing archaeologial site of Çatalhöyük and the simbolism of the sacred bull.

woman would save the world was first stated in this belief, which can be seen as the foundation of the messianic faith.

And we have the contemporary of the Christian Jesus, from Anatolia. His name is Apollonios, and he was born in "Bor" (the town of Tyana in the Roman province of Cappadocia in Anatolia) in 27 BC and died in Ephesus in 14 AD.

There are many other common practices and copied rituals that demonstrate how civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley influenced one another. Some examples of these influences include creation stories, narratives about gods punishing people with natural disasters like floods and earthquakes, and the ritual of sacrifice.

Q: How did Zoroastrianism, early Vedic thought, and Mesopotamian beliefs contribute to the later development of major world religions?

A. Refik Kutluer: Zoroastrianism incorporates both monotheistic and dualistic elements. It is believed to have influenced other major Western religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Mithraism, a sect of Zoroastrianism that focused on the worship of Mithra as the defender of truth, was a monotheistic mystery religion that thrived in the Roman Empire before the widespread acceptance of Christianity in the fourth century.

Many religions and philosophies that precede one another influence subsequent movements, often deifying natural forces in humanity's quest for "truth." The Persian Mithraic religion and its cult had a significant impact on Stoic philosophy in the 1st century.

The Stoics' beliefs in astronomy and astrology, which were derived from Mithras, contributed to their understanding that "fate cannot be challenged."

Stoics believe that philosophy is like a living being, with logic serving as its bones, ethics as its flesh, and physics as its soul. They assert that the purpose of philosophy is to achieve virtue through wisdom, understanding that all events occur as part of an inescapable chain of causes.

They believe that understanding reality and moral truths is crucial for living harmoniously with nature and achieving true happiness. Additionally, the concepts of conscience and the natural law are fundamental to Stoic philosophy.

The central principle of Stoicism is to act in accordance with nature. In this philosophy, everything is viewed as part of the divine.

Archaeologists believe that humans reached Britain around 4,000 BC. Evidence, such as human bones found in soil from niches behind the stone pillars at the site—similar to those discovered at Göbeklitepe—along with a significant amount of animal bones, suggests that ritual sacrifices were commonly performed there.

To act in alignment with nature means to use reason and wisdom, ultimately achieving harmony within oneself.

The Stoics, who emphasized the rational order of the universe and the significance of virtue, were influenced by Zoroastrian dualism, which presents a cosmic struggle between Ahura Mazda (the supreme god of good) and Angra Mainyu (the spirit of evil).

Raised with Stoic philosophy, St. Paul advocates for complete indifference to social conditions in the pursuit of salvation. For Paul, also known as Saul of Tarsus, the fundamental principles of life include righteousness, virtue, devotion to religion, faith, helping those in need, loving God, following the teachings of Jesus, and seeking knowledge.

As the understanding of monotheism and virtue became intertwined with the teachings and miracles of Jesus, Christianity began to flourish. Zoroastrianism influenced concepts of dualism, eschatology, and monotheism.

thallypr/AdobeStock

Vedic thought introduced ideas such as karma, reincarnation, Brahman, and various rituals, which in turn shaped Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Mesopotamian beliefs contributed to the development of polytheism, divine kingship, creation myths, and ethical principles, all of which had significant effects on both Western and Eastern religious traditions.

These contributions emphasize the interconnectedness of ancient civilizations and how their spiritual ideas and practices helped lay the foundation for the major world religions we recognize today.

Q: Could Göbekli Tepe represent an early transition from animism to structured religion?

A. Refik Kutluer: Göbekli Tepe appears to bear early signs of humanity's relationship with supernatural forces. It was built as a temple for spiritual ceremonies aimed at pleasing the gods, particularly through sacrificial rituals. It was a transitional period for hunter-gatherers as they moved toward a settled agricultural lifestyle. The people of that prehistoric era, who sought to establish a settled life through farming, believed they needed to seek divine approval by sacrificing some of their loved ones.

Sacrifice means that man makes a gift to the gods and expects a gift in return. They cut off human heads, defleshed and cleaned the skulls, and hung them at an angle to face the gods. The people wanted the gods to

Human sacrifice is more than just a ritual performed to appease the gods, predict the future, or bring luck and prosperity to those making the offering. It involves the exchange of a life—whether willingly or not—in return for supernatural assistance or for a greater cause.

first notice the huge, human-like pillars, followed by the sacrificed humans, particularly the young and beautiful ones.

Their hope was that this would please the gods, allowing humans to settle and farm in ideal conditions—free from storms and hail but blessed with sufficient rain and sunshine. Understanding what the gods desired was the key to their success.

Human sacrifice is more than just a ritual performed to appease the gods, predict the future, or bring luck and prosperity to those making the offering. It involves the exchange of a life—whether willingly or not—in return for supernatural assistance or for a greater cause. Additionally, other inanimate offerings were made at these temples.

A remarkable find is a limestone statue, referred to as the "gift bearer," a kneeling figure carrying a human head in its hands, the eyes and nose of which are discernible.

Göbekli Tepe, with its ritualistic architecture, symbolic carvings, and possible communal worship practices, may represent an early transition from animism—where the divine is often localized and tied to individual aspects of nature—to structured religion, where spiritual practices are organized.

The Colossus head of the emperor Constantine in Rome.

Q: What do the artistic representations at these Neolithic sites suggest about cosmic or metaphysical beliefs at the time?

A. Refik Kutluer: The ritual spaces created at these sites suggest an increasing desire to harmonize human actions with the forces of nature and the cosmos. The artistic and architectural features present reflect a deeper awareness of cosmic cycles, divine entities, and a spiritual hierarchy. These elements would eventually evolve into the more structured religions of the ancient world.

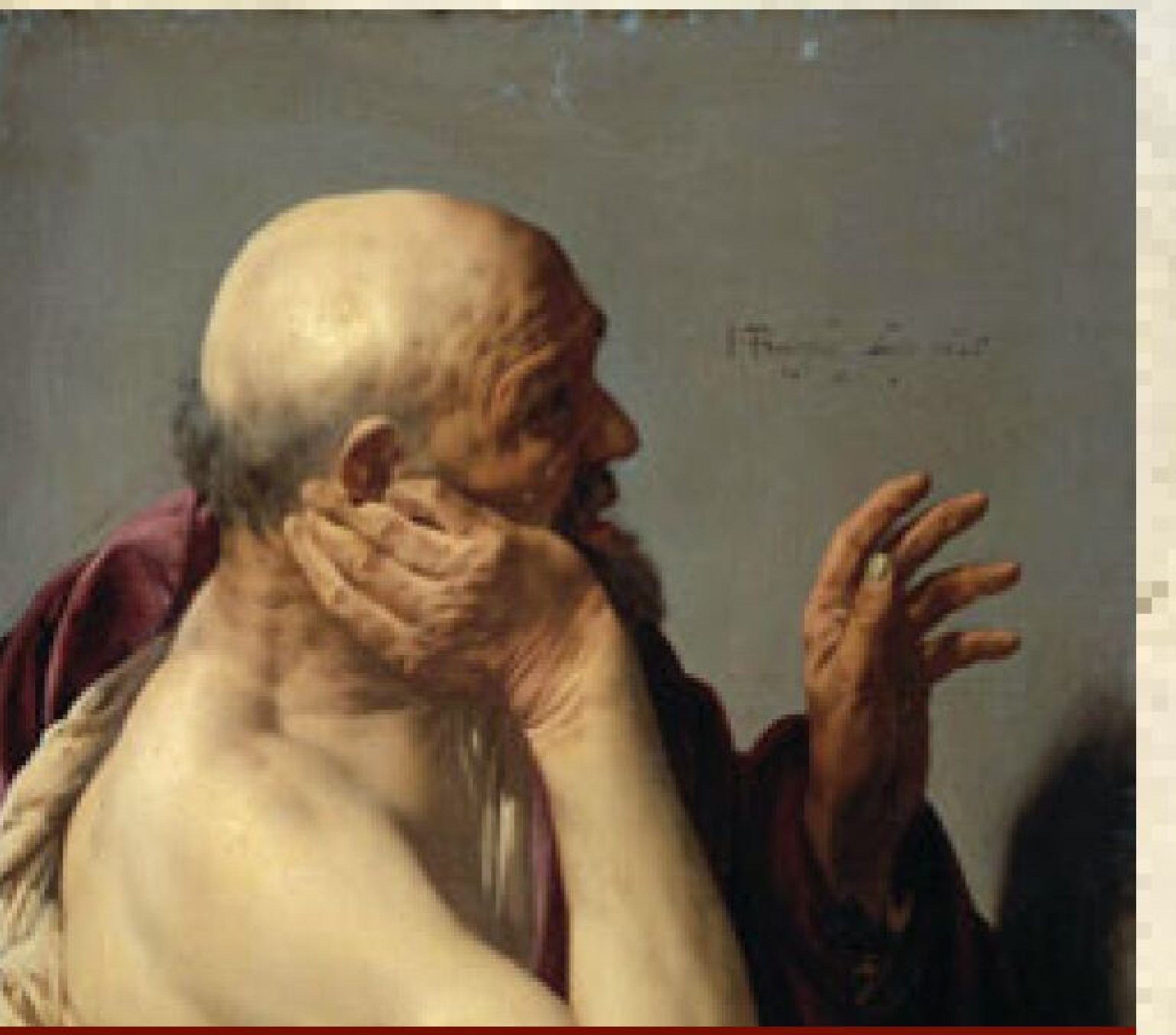
Göbekli Tepe, with its ritualistic architecture, symbolic carvings, and possible communal worship practices, may represent an early transition from animism—where the divine is often localized and tied to individual aspects of nature—to structured religion, where spiritual practices are organized.

Cultural & Technological Exchange Across Civilizations

Q: How did the Hellenistic period lead to a fusion of Greek, Persian, and Indian philosophies?

A. Refik Kutluer: The Hellenistic period was characterized by the blending of Greek, Persian, and Indian philosophies, which resulted in the creation of new intellectual frameworks that combined elements of rationalism, ethics, and cosmology from various traditions. However, a significant reason for this blending was more practical: the rise of new religions often relied on military strength.

A pivotal moment in this context occurred in the year 313 with Constantine's Edict of Milan. This important edict marked a significant change in the history of Christianity within the Roman Empire. It allowed Christians to worship openly without fear of persecution. The edict also granted them legal rights, enabling them to build churches and reclaim properties that had been taken from them. Additionally, by integrating



Heracltus painted as the weeping philosopher by Hendrik ter Brugghen (1628).

trained Christian soldiers into the Roman army, Constantine gained a strategic advantage. These soldiers received continuous training because the Roman army was pursuing them in an attempt to destroy them.

These soldiers not only supported the new faith but also strengthened the military, which helped Christianity gain greater acceptance among other religious groups of the time.

The Hellenistic period was characterized by the blending of Greek, Persian, and Indian philosophies, which resulted in the creation of new intellectual frameworks that combined elements of rationalism, ethics, and cosmology from various traditions

Alexander the Great's military conquests resulted in the creation of a vast empire that spanned three major cultural regions: Greece, Persia, and India. Indian philosophies, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, explored concepts like karma, the soul, detachment, and the nature of reality. These ideas significantly influenced Greek thought, especially in the areas of ethics and metaphysics.

Sassanid-era relief at Naqsh-e Rostam depicting Ahura Mazda presenting the diadem of sovereignty to Ardashir I.

Stoicism emphasizes rationality, the importance of virtue, and living in harmony with nature. These ideas share similarities with the cosmological views of Zoroastrianism, particularly the concept of a rational divine order. Together, these philosophies and beliefs have blended to form Christianity, although the main reasons were more rational, such as acquiring military power.

Q: Are there any philosophical similarities between ancient Chinese thought (Confucianism, Daoism) and early Western philosophies (Platonism, Stoicism)?

A. Refik Kutluer: Yes there are. Ancient Chinese and early Western philosophies, despite their cultural and historical differences, share numerous philosophical similarities, particularly in their approaches to ethics, self-cultivation, the natural world, and the pursuit of the good life. Confucianism and Daoism emphasize virtue, balance, and living in harmony with the cosmos, while Platonism and Stoicism focus on the development of the soul, the cultivation of virtue, and the importance of self-control and inner peace. These shared ideas highlight universal human concerns about the nature of existence, the self, and how to live a meaningful, moral life in relation to others and the world.

The Dervishes dance.

Q: How did the Islamic Golden Age contribute to preserving and advancing Greek, Persian, and Indian knowledge?

A. Refik Kutluer: The Islamic Golden Age, which lasted roughly from the 8th to the 14th centuries, was a time of extraordinary intellectual, cultural, and scientific achievements in the Islamic world.

Prominent Islamic philosophers such as Al-Farabi, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) made significant contributions during this period. Additionally, mathematicians like Al-Khwarizmi, known as the "father of algebra," played a crucial role in advancing knowledge. Avicenna, a specialist in metaphysics, medicine, and logic, is particularly noted for his influential work, the "Canon of Medicine." These figures together contributed immensely to the progress of human knowledge and civilization.

Additionally, the Anatolian Renaissance of the 13th Century brought the winds of enlightenment to Europe, significantly influencing the European Renaissance through the ideas of philosophers such as İbn'ül Arabi, Jalaluddin Rumi, Hacı Bektaş Veli, and Yunus Emre.

Q: Can we trace any modern-day philosophical or religious ideas directly back to these early interactions?

A. Refik Kutluer: Yes. For example, Stoicism and Confucianism stress the importance of living virtuously and fulfilling one's role within society or the universe. Al-Farabi's book on ethical conduct emphasizes ethical principles aligned with Islamic values.

Ibn Arabi, a renowned Sufi philosopher, emphasized the concept of divine unity (Tawhid), which posits that everything in existence is interconnected and part of a greater whole. This idea resonates with the modern ecological movement, which highlights the interconnectedness of life on Earth and the holistic worldview that sees all things as linked. Such perspectives can be traced back to ancient Indian and Islamic philosophical teachings.

The Future of Ancient Knowledge & Ongoing Discoveries

Q: How much more do you think we have yet to uncover about ancient connections between civilizations?

I believe there is still much more to uncover. Newly discovered sites like Göbekli Tepe and Karahan Tepe are reshaping our understanding of ancient societies, but many ancient texts are yet to be found or fully deciphered.

Q: What recent discoveries might change our understanding of cultural diffusion and philosophical evolution?

I believe there are many corrections needed in our ancient history. I would like to emphasize two examples.

First, if we had not been able to decipher the dual-language "Tablet of the Treaty of Kadesh," we might have believed Ramses II, who claimed victory and presented the peace treaty with the Hittites as proof of an Egyptian triumph. However, the treaty indicates that the Hittites maintained control over the city of Kadesh and much of the surrounding territory.

Second, a recent analysis of fossils discovered in a Spanish cave indicates that Neanderthals had the capacity for symbolic and abstract thinking prior to any interactions with Homo sapiens. This potential for abstract thinking was previously thought to be exclusive to Homo sapiens.

The Newly Discovered Tablet V of the Epic of Gilgamesh, The Sulaymaniyah Museum, Iraq.

Q: Are there any unexplored sites or texts that could further reveal how ancient societies influenced each other's ideologies and advancements?

A. Refik Kutluer: If concrete evidence supporting the existence of the lost continent of Mu or Atlantis is discovered, or if the saved copies of the books from the burned Library of Alexandria—rumored to still exist—are found, I am certain that much of our current understanding will need to be revised.

Q: How can studying these ancient connections help us understand the modern world's interconnected cultures and philosophies?

A. Refik Kutluer: By examining these ancient connections, we can recognize the ongoing nature of global interaction. Acknowledging the shared legacy of historical developments promotes a more collaborative approach to contemporary challenges, such as climate change, medical research, equality, global peace, and ethical issues.

A.Refik Kutluer, CTIE
Economist –
Tourism Executive
Member of Fijet
"World Tourism Writers' and Journalists' Association"

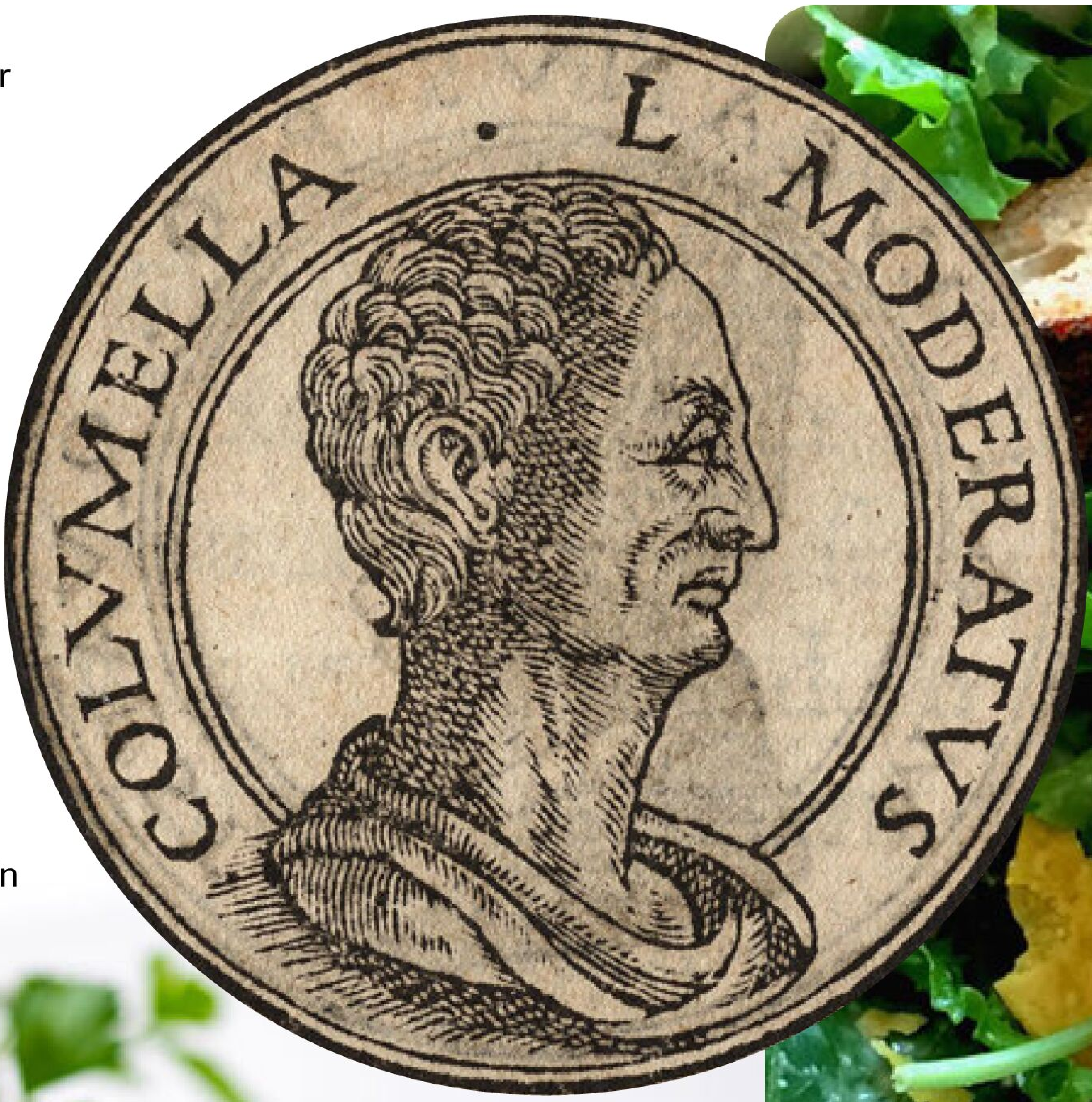
Cooking recipes from the ancient world

MORETUM:

the best salad in Roman Empire

Lucio Giunio Moderato Columella was a Roman writer known mainly for his works dedicated to agricultural sciences and therefore to agriculture. He was born in Cadiz in the 1st century AD. and was involved in the political life of Rome as a military tribune in both Cilicia and Syria in 34.

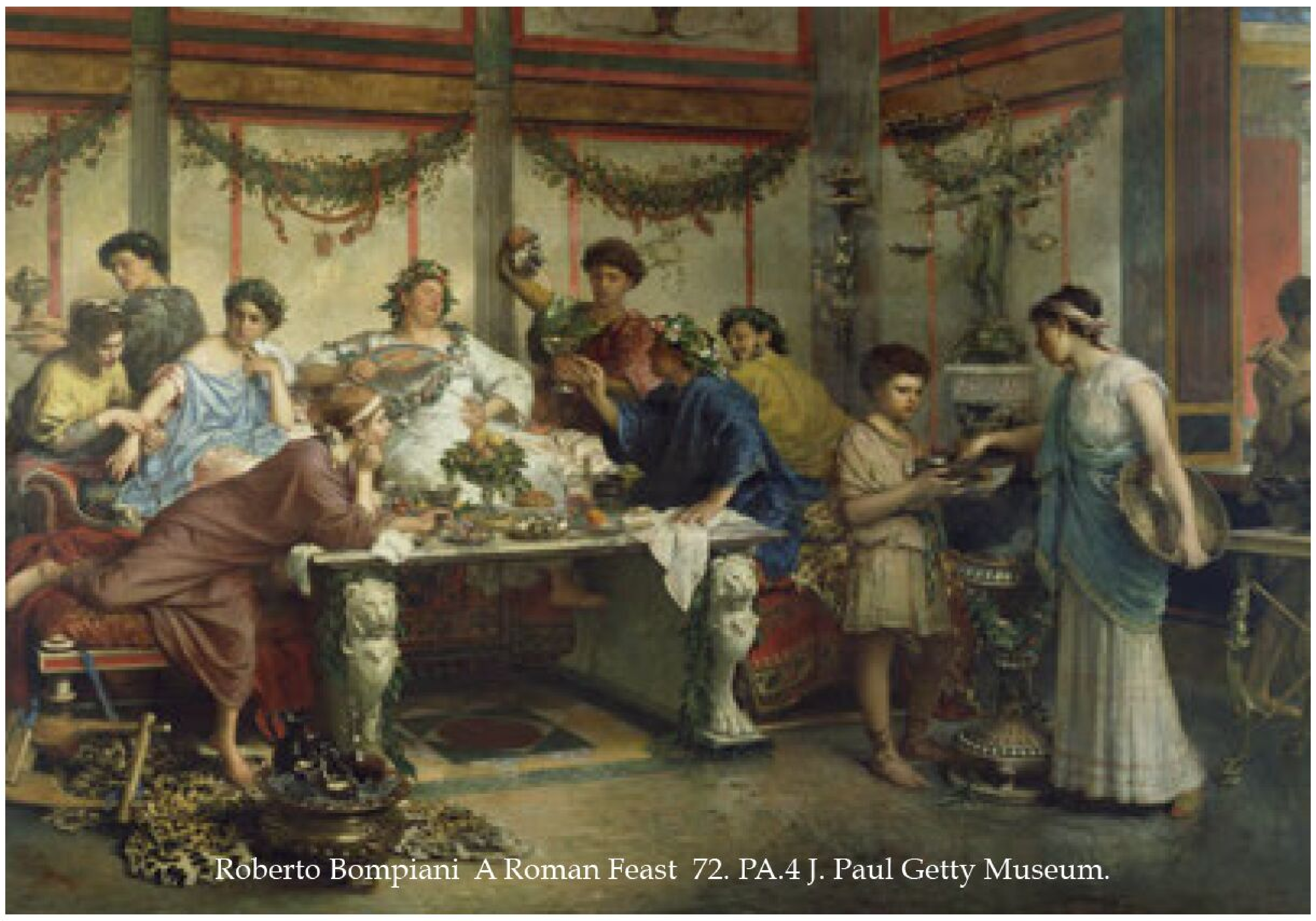
We know that in 41 he was located near Albano, near Rome, where he owned some lands. Columella's main work was the De re Rustica, conceived in 12 books which represents a fundamental work for the understanding of agriculture in ancient Rome.



Lucius Junius
Moderatus Columella

Academy of Taste

By Massimo Bonasorte



Roberto Bompiani A Roman Feast 72. PA.4 J. Paul Getty Museum.

De re Rustica is primarily a treatise on agriculture, but nestled within its practical advice on farming, viticulture, and estate management are glimpses of Roman culinary practices. While not a cookbook in the modern sense, Columella includes recipes and food preparation techniques that reveal much about daily life, diet, and gastronomic traditions in the 1st-century Roman Empire. These recipes, scattered primarily in *Book XII* (which focuses on the duties of the *villica*, the estate manager's wife), emphasize self-sufficiency, preservation, and the utilization of farm produce.

In addition to indications and discussions on the agrarian topic, in the Roman writer's books there are also a series of culinary recipes that fully testify to the extraordinary creativity of the Romans

Cooking recipes from the ancient world

MORETUM:

the best salad in Roman Empire

If you like more spicy taste
change the lattuce wih the arugula.

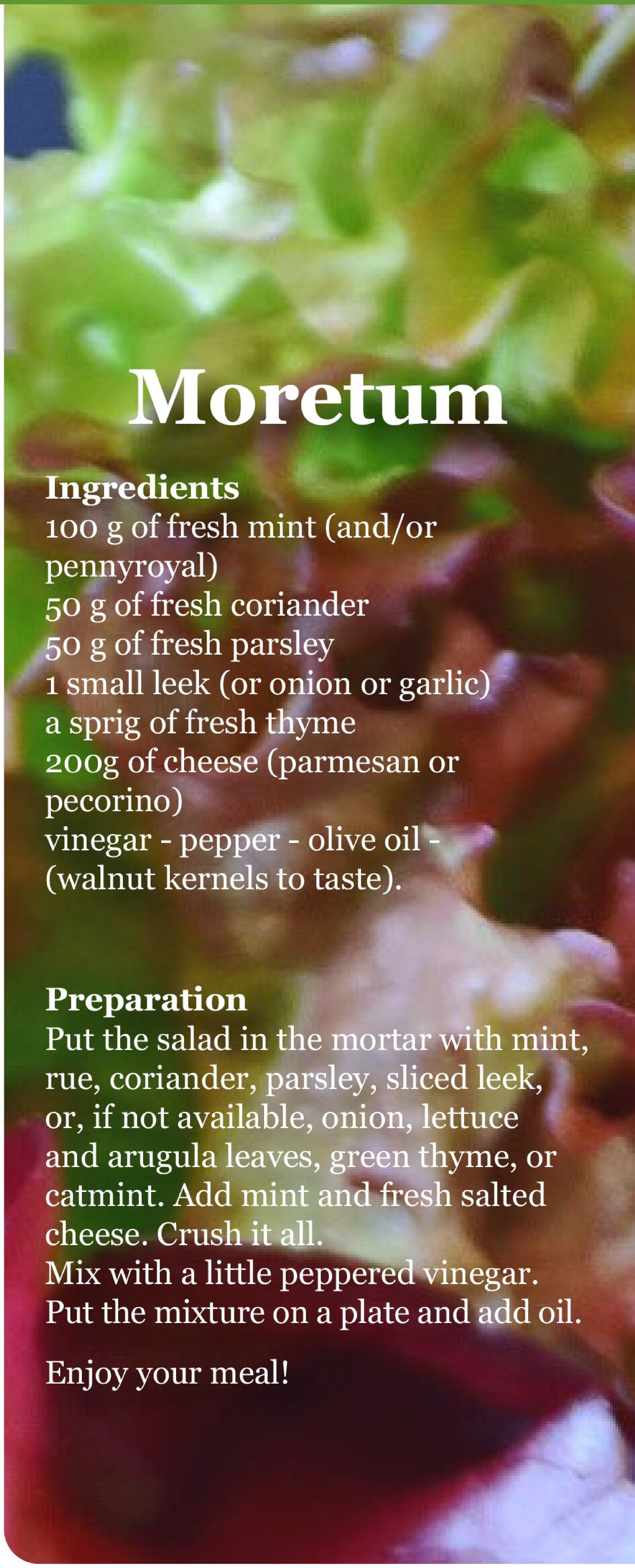
in the kitchen, even in the "sector" of vegetable side dishes. In fact, what we present is the Columella salad: "*Prepare moretum as follows: Grind two parts cheese and one part salt (as much as is sufficient) in a mortar. Afterwards, mix in cleaned spelt groats very gently by hand, so that no gluten forms in it. Then grind together savory, rue, coriander, celery seed, leek or green onion, cabbage, lettuce leaves, tender beet greens, fresh thyme shoots, green basil, catmint, and, if you wish, cucumber root as well—all as dried as possible. Afterward, add oil and vinegar. Shape this mixture with the cheese and spelt groats into small cakes, and use it when needed.*"

Here is the latin text:

"Moretum sic facito: casei partes duas et unam salis, quod satis erit, in mortario conterito. Postea alicam purgatam manu lentissime admisceto, ne gluten in ea fiat. Deinde satureiam, rutam, coriandrum, apii semen, porrum, aut cepam viridem, brassicam, folia lactucae, mollem betam, thymi viridis pampinos, viride ocinum, nepetam, tum etiam cucumeris radicem, si voles, eandemque quam maxime siccam conterito. Postea oleum addito et acetum. Hoc mixtum cum caseo et alica in pastillos digerito, et cum opus erit, utere."

It is a very special salad as salt is completely absent and all the ingredients are worked in the mortar. So here's how to prepare the Columella salad recipe. ■

Garlic is important but also an onion
is very tasty. In the poem "Moretum,"
Virgil tells the story of Symilus, a farmer,
who is making his morning breakfast.



Moretum

Ingredients
100 g of fresh mint (and/or pennyroyal)
50 g of fresh coriander
50 g of fresh parsley
1 small leek (or onion or garlic)
a sprig of fresh thyme
200g of cheese (parmesan or pecorino)
vinegar - pepper - olive oil - (walnut kernels to taste).

Preparation
Put the salad in the mortar with mint, rue, coriander, parsley, sliced leek, or, if not available, onion, lettuce and arugula leaves, green thyme, or catmint. Add mint and fresh salted cheese. Crush it all.
Mix with a little peppered vinegar.
Put the mixture on a plate and add oil.

Enjoy your meal!

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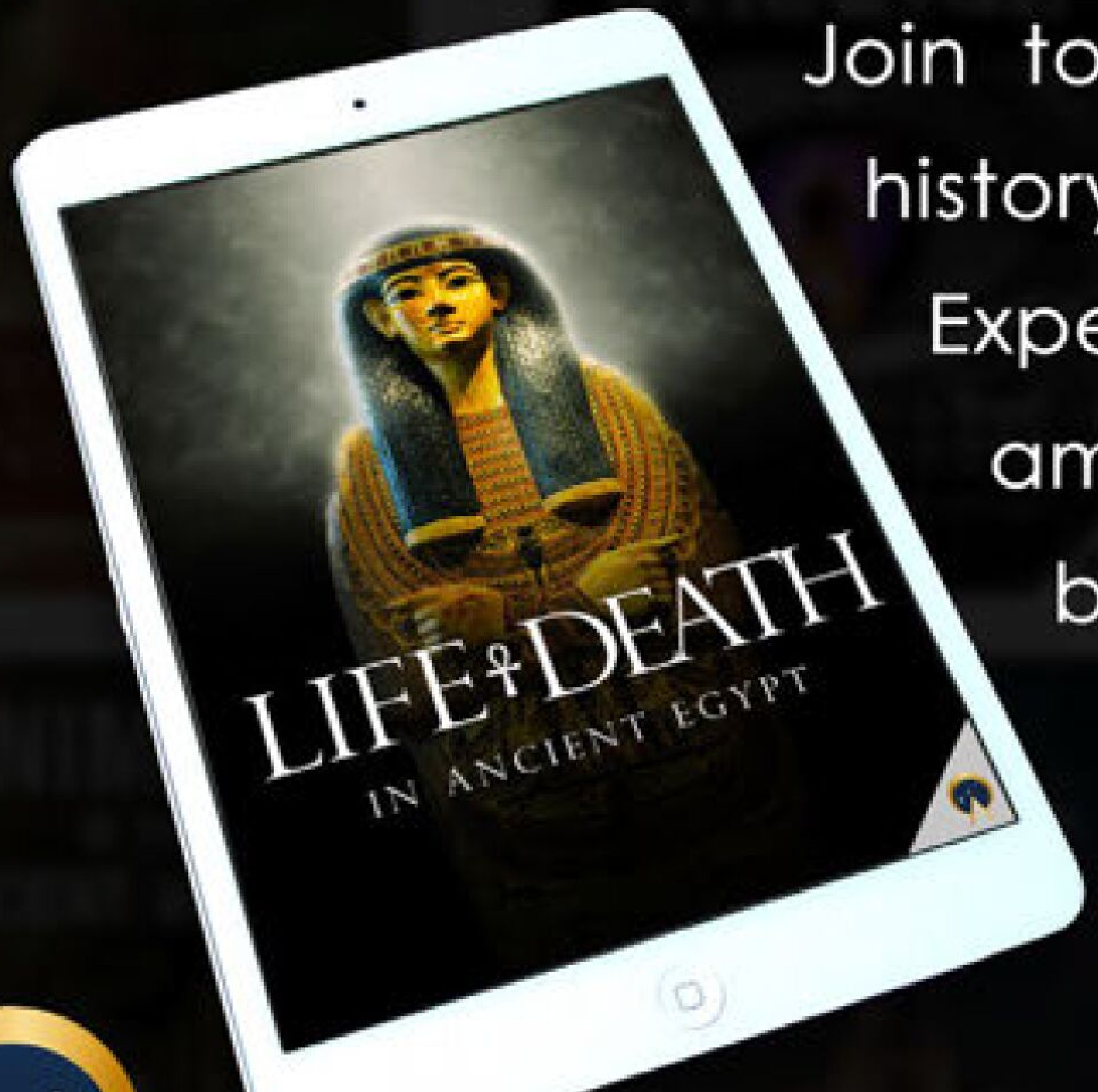

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